

*Elyne Mitchell*

CENTENARY OF THE CREATOR  
OF THE BESTSELLING *SILVER BRUMBY* SERIES



# Silver Brumby Echoing

The final five classic  
titles in the  
**SILVER BRUMBY** series



# Silver Brumby Echoing



 **Angus & Robertson**  
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## *Brumby Family Trees*

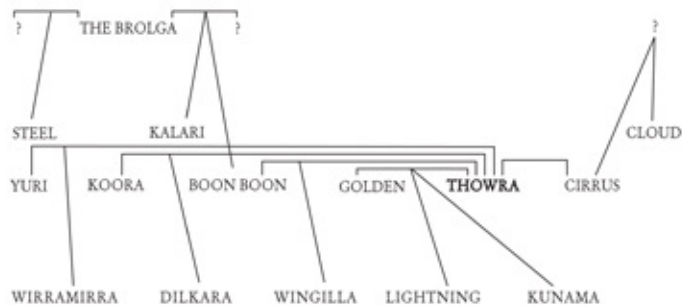
### THE FIRST GENERATION — HOW IT ALL BEGAN



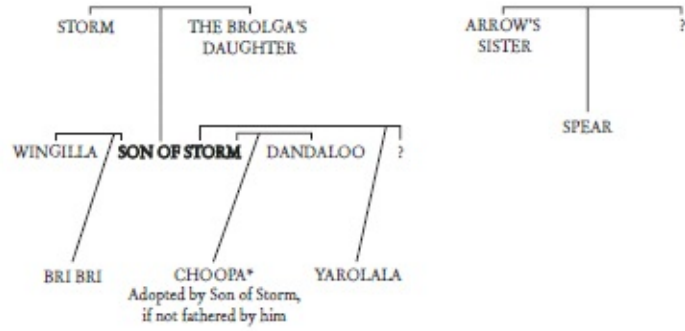
### THE MERGING OF THE SUN AND THE MOON



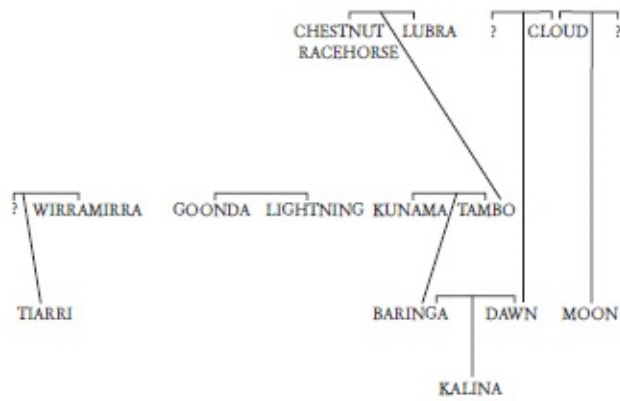
### THOWRA'S CLAN



YARRAMAN'S LEGACY  
(EXCLUDING THE SILVER HERD)



THE BRUMBY KINGDOM





## **Dancing Brumby**

## **Dedication**

*Dedicated to my great-nephew and great-niece Hugh and Emily Chauvel.*

### *She Nudged her Foal to See if it were Real*

Now that her newborn foal was clean and dry, the old roan mare could look him over properly. Undoubtedly — even though he lay among bluebells and silver daisy leaves and he was all colours himself — he *was* real, not just the bad dream of an old mare, exhausted after giving birth to the last foal she, Dandaloo, would ever have.

She nudged him, more to see if he actually would move than to make him get up.

Then that weird, rather large head — blue roan with great white blotches — came up off the silver leaves, and the nostrils quivered with a snuffling sound. The eyes — each one within a huge, irregular white blotch — opened, and focused on her. Even had she wanted to forget she had ever given birth to such a tiny, multi-coloured foal, he would follow her now to the end of the earth. Then, as she looked at him, she knew she did not want to forget him. With a force such as she had never felt for any other foal, love for this weird little creature rose up within the old mare, almost overwhelming her, and she bent her head to nuzzle all around his face with gentle lips.

The foal struggled to his feet on legs that looked unusual, and Dandaloo saw that his body was dark blue roan, with white in big uneven markings all over. She pushed him lightly towards her milk. Milk sprayed onto his head during his efforts to suck.

They would know each other, now, in the dark of the night, in wind storm or in falling snow, until he no longer needed care. Perhaps they would know each other forever and forever, as long as life went on, because *this* foal might need love and care always, and the roan mare would not have another foal to take her attention from him.

The sun was sinking below Davies Plain and the lower foothills. The foal lay down, and the old mare settled slowly beside him; warm flank touching warm flank, electric currents flowing one to the other, in their hair, joining them.

The roan mare looked out through the messmates and the bossiaea bushes, at other horses grazing on Quambat Flat. She saw them through a gilded haze, as the sun shafts shone through the golden flowers. A big stallion, whom she knew lived on the Cobberas and claimed that as his territory, his earth, seemed cast in gleaming metal. The mares and foals — the bays, the browns, grazing near him,

the chestnuts and roans — seemed to burn with gold, and then become dark as the shadows lengthened and engulfed them; shadows of hills and of forest trees.

The old mare watched all the horses, wondering. She noted how the stallion kept raising his head and looking around. That stallion of the Cobberas bimble always kept his herd pretty close. Dandaloo looked down at her sleeping foal and a shiver went through her, raising her hair. Her foal was a later spring foal than most of the others in that herd, and she knew he was too small, and very strange-looking. Once, last summer, she had seen that Cobberas stallion kill a foal that was misshapen and who never stayed with the herd.

Dandaloo belonged to Son of Storm's herd, who grazed higher up the flat, and she had not expected to see this stallion so far down the slopes of the Cobberas. Filled with a cold dread now, she nuzzled at her foal's face and ears. Fear seemed to grow like a bubble within her. This foal was so small. Were its legs queer? Were its knees too big? A vision went through her mind. She saw herself fighting to protect her foal. She knew it was almost certain that no misshapen foal would be allowed to live.

She looked over the flat again. All the shadows had merged into darkness. The creek was still luminous, reflecting the sky. For a few moments more she must be careful not to move, in case any movement aroused curiosity. By the time the night was over, perhaps this terribly small foal might be strong enough to follow her. All the other foals she had borne very soon walked with her, and within a day or so had been proudly led back to the herd. This time her instinct made her determined to hide the foal from anything that might harm him. Anything, in fact, that might come near — even other foals, who would boss him.

Dandaloo was mainly a loner, as was her mate, Son of Storm. Son of Storm was gentle and kind, but even he might not care to let such a strange foal live.

The old mare did not sleep much that night. Once she stood up and stirred the foal awake, and made him drink. He must drink if he were to grow. Surely he sucked for longer this time, and took a few more shaky steps before his legs seemed to crumple and he lay down again. Presently she lay down beside him.

Some hours later, as the moon rose, she heard a sound — louder than that which a wombat, trundling through the bush, would make.

She lay absolutely still, listening to the sounds coming closer — the whisper of bushes being bent one way and then swishing back, the crack of breaking twigs. She lay still, but with every muscle tense, ready to spring up and protect her foal. Whatever it was that was walking through the bush did not come straight towards them, but seemed to go hither and thither, as though looking for something.

She gathered her legs up beneath her, ready to leap to her feet. All the hair of her hide was standing up with fear; her skin crept, cold, along her back.

There was silence for a while. Then she could hear breathing.

A full moon was just rising; its light silvered the topmost leaves of the trees. A faint movement of air brought a scent to her. She knew that scent, and it had never brought fear with it.

The moon sailed up through the treetops into the sky.

There, dark against the moonlight, was a stallion's head and neck, known and loved, yet who knew what he would think of a possibly crippled foal?

The mare lay quite still, almost paralysed with fear for this foal, but she knew that if the stallion moved she would somehow be standing there over her foal.

She tried not to breathe.

It was Son of Storm who was staring down at the dark bundle beside her. Surely he would not see, by moonlight, that the foal was disgracefully small, and so strangely coloured. Unless the stallion pushed it on to its feet, he would not see the rather queer legs.

She held back a snort of terror from escaping her throat, but the stallion just stood there, gazing at her and at that far too small foal.

Once she saw moonlight shining on Son of Storm's kindly eye, as she stared too — at him. They knew each other well, these two, but a newborn foal creates a tension, especially if it is weak or malformed. Nothing stirred. Even a possum sitting on a branch above sat absolutely still. Later, a Willy wagtail took up its song to the moon where it had left off when it heard the sound of the stallion approaching.

As the tinkling song broke the silence, the great stallion began to back slowly. His head dropped momentarily, close to the foal, but he must have felt or seen the tense muscles in the old mare, because he looked intently at her and continued quietly to back away. He barely broke a twig, as though he understood the danger that existed for the foal.

The mare felt herself begin to shake all over. The foal stirred, but Dandaloo was still too frightened, and perhaps Son of Storm still too close, for her to make the tiny colt get up and drink. She waited till her heart had stopped thundering and her body had ceased to shake.

This time when the foal stood up in the moonlight, he no longer looked to her like a strange dwarf. Instead, in her eyes, he was beautiful.

Day would come soon. They really must move before first light — if the foal could move. She made him get up and drink again, then let him have a sleep till it was time to start on their way.

They only got as far as the first thick bank of hovea and bossiaea before he had to rest. Just over the other side of the first ridge rising above the flats, the old mare knew, was a secret creek with a pool of sweet water and a grassy flat, all hidden by tall candlebarks, tree ferns, and the scented alpine grevillea bushes. The foal would have to be stronger for them to get there. Water, clear cold water, was what she was beginning to crave. Water to drink, and grass and shrubs to eat — everything to keep her strong, to make milk on which the foal would grow big. They must get there by evening.

She realised that if her little colt sucked for a while, and she then walked ahead for a few steps, he followed, wobbling, after her. On they went like that, in stages, with rests through the day, the mare getting more and more thirsty.

It was nearly sunset when she heard a lyrebird mimicking a thrush and then copying the crack of a whipbird. They were nearly there. The clear, cool creek and the little flat with the candlebarks all around was home to a lyrebird.

She quickened her pace and the little one, trying to keep up, stumbled and half-fell. Finally, she pushed him gently through the bushes, and there it was — the grass, feed, the magic water. She hurried to the water's edge and began to drink. The foal watched in amazement as she sank her nose in.

They must have left a track which anyone who wanted to find them could easily follow. As she slaked her thirst, Dandaloo's tired mind cleared and there came a vision of a stallion's head and great, crested neck against the moonlight. She felt sure that Son of Storm would never harm her, but she would have to take the foal much further away than this hidden flat if he were not to be found by that stallion that came down from the Cobberas, *if* that stallion could be bothered to track down a very old mare and her foal.

After the foal had had all the milk he wanted, Dandaloo rolled on the sweet grass, and was amazed to see the little colt try to buck, and try to take a few dancing steps, with his queer legs swinging out sideways. He even explored to the edge of the stream. Her strange but beautiful foal was becoming stronger.

The hidden flat below the candlebarks had some special quality. The strength of that sweet grass and of the creek water, and the strength of the surrounding trees with the red smudges on their white trunks, must surely enter into this last foal of an old mare. A sudden sensation of safety touched her, and the urgency to move faded away. Here her foal could grow in peace for a little while.

The darkness of the foal's second night began to flow through the bush — a velvet grey enfolding the feet of the candlebarks, slowly hiding the grass and the sand of the little beach, but the creek changed into a rose and silver ribbon reflecting the sky. The foal, without any urging, walked towards his mother for a drink, and then settled down to sleep at the foot of the sweet-scented grevillea

bushes with their little white flowers. Dandaloo grazed without fear as darkness fell.

The moon rose, moving over the sky, its light falling in beams that drifted over the hidden flat, its rays seeking out the foal lying asleep beneath the alpine grevilleas, and a tall candlebark. No one came looking for them.

Dandaloo knew they could not stay there for ever. Someone might come and simply find the hidden flat by mistake. In the meantime, the foal grew stronger and he gambolled about as a foal should, but although his mother had expected him to grow quite quickly, he did not. Something told her that she could not walk into the herd with pride, leading such a queerly marked dwarf of a foal, whose legs circled out sideways as he walked or trotted, and whose head was too big.

At last she felt they must leave their safe haven and go to somewhere more distant from the herd's grazing grounds.

She began leading the little one further and further each day, trying to keep close to creeks so that she got plenty of water and where there was bound to be sweet grass.

At last the foal was able to keep up with her if she trotted on a long grassy stretch, but he still had a queer gait in which his forelegs swung out sideways, and he often stumbled, sometimes even fell down. His first falls were accompanied by a little snort of dismay. Slowly, he seemed to learn some secret, some self-confidence.

When she first noticed this, the mare was leading him along the bank of a creek. They were high above the creek, on a narrow strip of grass above the water, with a steep fall to flat ground at the water's edge.

A kookaburra was laughing and took her attention for a moment, but a slight sound made her look round. Her heart seemed to give a tremendous jolt as she saw her foal's legs seem to tangle, saw him fall and begin to slide, but suddenly he kicked his legs over, so that he rolled and got those strange legs under him again and was up on his feet quite quickly. The old mare sighed with deep relief.

The little dwarf trotted after her almost jauntily.

When they reached a sandy beach, she lay down and rolled. Sand would take the feeling of fear out of her coat — fear that something might happen to this strange little foal.

The foal watched her rolling for a second, and then started to leap and buck and dance — even if his legs were flying wild. He was happy and enjoying himself, enjoying his new-found strength. The old mare was so pleased at his enjoyment that she began to romp and play with him, there on the sandy beach,

beside a singing creek.

It was the lyrebirds who heard the song in the creek and learnt that Dandaloo, so loved by the mountains, was doing a dance with her dwarf foal. And because the dance made a magic pattern, other little animals — bobuck possums, kangaroos, wallabies, baby echidnas, and round, fat baby wombats — all came to see, until there was a circle of bright-eyed watchers. Even a lyrebird came out of the thickets of blanketwood bush and tea-tree that grew close to the stream, and a yellow-faced honeyeater sat on a tree fern.

At last the players were tired. The foal lay down for a moment, his little blue and white flanks heaving, but when his mother went to the stream to drink, he struggled up and went to the water beside her. Suddenly he looked round at the young animals, then slowly walked over to the wombat and rubbed his head against it. The echidna's enquiring snout touched him on the nose, and a baby kangaroo hopped over to stand nearby.

The old mare watched and wondered as her foal became one of the circle of young animals.

The yellow-faced honeyeater called 'choopa, choopa' and Dandaloo knew that that would be her foal's name: 'Choopa, the Little Lizard.'

The baby kangaroo gave the echidna a playful pat on the snout, and the echidna rolled itself into a ball, head tucked under. Choopa put his head right down between his feet, as though copying the echidna, then he did his funny little dance again, and the yellow-faced honeyeater called and called.

The stream carried its story far away for anyone who had ears to hear, and where this stream turned west to join the Indi River in its journey towards the sea the south wind took up the tale and bore it up into the high mountains, and it whispered through the snow gums and up on to the rocky peaks where the snow still lay in long drifts. So the mountain eyebrights captured in their lilac-coloured cups the tale of a dwarf foal dancing in the centre of a fairy ring of young animals, playing and dancing, and the pattern of the dance within the circle called up magic from the bush, called it down from the sky, so that the whole world of the old blue mare and the young foal was alive with it.

Before the foal was exhausted, Dandaloo walked into the centre of the ring to join him, as though she knew he was really tired, and she lay down there. When Choopa's weird, strange legs folded beneath him, he collapsed beside her and was immediately asleep.

Even though he slept, the spell which his dance had woven within the circle of watching eyes stayed with him. From henceforth, the odd dwarf foal, the magic dancer, was, to all the young animals of the bush, a spellmaker — one who could tether you to a star with a glittering cobweb thread.



An unusual sort of pride throbbed through the bones and veins of the old mother, but she knew that the time had not come yet to take him into the herd.

## *The Enchanted Circle*

Dandaloo, with Choopa knee-high beside her, stood on a hillside above a flat near the bend of the Limestone Creek. They were well hidden inside the forest, and could see a small herd of mares and foals with a young stallion.

Choopa watched intently.

He could see that there were two or three very young foals, perhaps not much older than himself, even though they were bigger. They were all playing together. He stared and wondered. Those foals never fell as they galloped and played. Perhaps their legs were straighter than his, or the knees less bumbly. They seemed to trot, canter and gallop to a music which he could barely hear.

He tried a few cantering steps, but his rhythm was different, kept breaking. Two young echidnas came hurtling along near him. This time when they stopped and tucked their heads under they began to dig, just there, on the spot, and disappeared underground quite rapidly.

A born mimic, Choopa tried again to copy them and tuck his head under, but this time he tried to dig, too — and fell over. Then he realised that the echidnas had dug with their hind feet. He tried this — and finished up almost turning a somersault. He picked himself up, shook the twigs and leaves out of his coat, then started dancing, because it had all been rather a joke.

His mother thought that his fall and his quick recovery had all looked as if his joints were unusually flexible. Something at the back of her mind had been worrying her for a while ... she remembered a foal her mother had had, full brother to herself, who seemed to be crippled. He used to amble, like Choopa ambled. This brother had not survived his second winter. The memory sent a creeping shiver along her back, making the blue-roan hairs stand up. But Choopa had some gift which her brother had not had. Also, their mother had died in a severe, week-long blizzard, and she was not there to care for her young. Dandaloo would stand by Choopa forever ... somehow. Again she felt that overpowering love for the dwarf with the rough blotches of white around the eyes. Those eyes were beginning to look out at his world with a sort of joy. Or perhaps he found everything funny!

He would have to grow bigger before she could take him to join their herd though. Day after day went by but he never seemed to grow like her other foals had grown. He romped, he reared and bucked and he could now follow her quite

fast on those wide-swinging legs. But he still stumbled and sometimes fell. Even though he was still barely knee-high to his mother, he had become very strong.

Often other young animals joined in his games, dodging in among the dark black sallee trees, springing onto rocks, splashing in pools together. He soon learnt that they all enjoyed his dance, so he danced for them. He never fell when he was dancing, only when he was trying to gallop. He had also learnt that if he tucked his head under as he stumbled and fell, he could do a quarter roll and pick himself up in a second with no difficulty at all. This was something else. The kookaburras would laugh on a branch above as he did his crazy somersault.

Choopa enjoyed this feeling of strength and achievement. Other foals, whom he had watched from a distance, only occasionally took a fall during a mock fight. He realised that his ability to turn a bad fall into a perfect roll-over somersault was something unique to himself.

Since the herds of red and white cattle were no longer permitted to graze the Snowy Mountains in summertime the Park Rangers often stopped men coming in from the south hunting brumbies. But they still came, these men, perhaps several at a time, perhaps just one on his own with a lasso coiled and hanging from his saddle and riding a very fast horse. Anyone who came from the south, going towards Quambat Flat, passed over a shoulder of the rough and rocky Cobberas. Dandaloo knew the track that was used and she and Choopa were well to the west of it.

Summer was the time when the brumby hunters came. It was already summer and very hot — much too hot for as early in summer as this.

The strong scent of the eucalyptus leaves at evening, after the hot sun had beat on them all day, made Dandaloo feel restless. In truth there was a restlessness in all the animals. Only Choopa seemed calm. Yet one evening she saw him and all his young friends forming into their circle again, led by Choopa, dancing the spell-weaving pattern as if they were evoking something. Protection ... safe passage ...?

Dandaloo lay down nearby, and when the dance was over Choopa collapsed beside her. She cradled the blue, dwarf foal with her legs, and he fell asleep immediately, but she — she half sleeping, half waking — was invaded by fears. Her legs closed around her foal a little more firmly.

Men might come hunting. The Cobberas stallion might come, and he might think that the dwarf foal should not be allowed to live. All her muscles twitched as she dreamt of herself fighting for his life.

At last she slept deeply and when she woke the fears had altered to an urge to wander, or perhaps a profound need to find safe places.

When first light came the next day, she stirred Choopa to have a feed and then led him off through the forest in the general direction in which the Limestone Creek ran — not higher country, but somehow fulfilling her longing to wander.

In truth, Dandaloo was longing to go up higher into the mountains, but in this heat she knew that she should stay low, where the creeks flowed deeper and water was more easily found. Also it was no good dreaming that Choopa, her strong little lizard, could climb the high mountains yet. She had stopped expecting to find that he had grown suddenly in the dark of the night.

They kept moving along all day, Choopa often looking behind to see if any of his young companions were following. The possums had stayed in their trees, but, hopping through the messmates and the slim, white and towering ribbon gums, were the mysterious shadows of kangaroos and wallabies, seen one minute and invisible the next — those who had already left their mother's pouches. Even an echidna came, trotting along rather slowly.

That night, before the stars showed bright in the sky, these young animals formed their ring around Choopa and Dandaloo. Each one was too tired to dance, but they were there, still within the spell which Choopa had created and in some way making sure that the spell was not broken.

Night fell and the sky was brilliantly lit by the stars. The circle of eyes was still visible around Choopa and Dandaloo when there came from high above them, sounding from the tallest of ribbon gums, 'Quark! Quark! Quark!', in quick, staccato barks, not the long drawn-out 'Qua-a-rk' of the bushy-tailed possum which they knew so well.

Dandaloo understood what it was, and knew to look up high in a ribbon gum. Choopa looked where his mother was looking, and he saw, far up on the white trunk, just visible against the star-bright sky, a black shape. There came another series of sharp barks, and the black shape took off, spread what seemed like big black wings and went gliding through the darkness on a long, long glide to the almost invisible forest floor.

Choopa sprang up, but his mother did not bother. She had seen a giant glider appear to fly down off a ribbon gum before, and had never caught up with one. By the time she had reached the place it had landed, it had climbed up the next tree. But Choopa found the place this one had touched down — found it empty, of course — but he did a twirling, whirling dance and knew the giant glider was watching him; for there it was, high up near the branches of another ribbon gum. And there it clung and watched, while a spell was woven below, by a little dancing dwarf.

When the giant glider took off again, it was full of tales to tell to anyone it

met in its aerial journeying through forest and sky.

Choopa went back to Dandaloo, unaware that word of the dancing dwarf foal would be spread by all the animals of the night. Eventually tales would reach Quambat Flat. Though Quambat Flat filled a lot of Dandaloo's thoughts and wishes, because one day soon she would have to take Choopa there, Choopa had no picture in his mind of the grassy flat below the Cobberas mountains, where some of his half-brothers and half-sisters played.

Mother and foal, they slowly wandered their way along to where the Limestone was joined by the creek that flowed down from Quambat Flat. An uncertain feeling stopped her leading Choopa up on to the grassy flat where her herd grazed. Perhaps she should still wait till Choopa had grown a little bigger ... but because she really had been lonely, she kept edging through the forest that was all around Quambat Flat.

Each day had been getting hotter and hotter, too hot for early summer, but even so, Dandaloo was surprised to find that the herd tended to be sheltering in the edge of the forest. She did wonder if there had been some other danger, as she led Choopa a little further into the trees. As usual his little band of young kangaroos and wallabies were close by, following him, invisible in the bush, but coming for a game whenever the mare and foal stopped to rest.

Then quite suddenly they were not there — not moving invisibly through the bitter pea bushes, not appearing from the blanketwood thickets to romp with Choopa. It was queer that Choopa realised almost sooner than Dandaloo that there was danger coming, feeling it close by, but with no idea what it was.

Dandaloo stood still, one leg raised, listening. There seemed to be no unusual sound. Then she heard faint, stealthy movements. They ceased: everything was eerily silent, then they started again — animals creeping ... escaping? But from what?

Men hunting brumbies usually made some sound, usually had barking dogs. Dandaloo didn't even imagine brumby hunters ... suddenly, before Dandaloo even knew he was anywhere near, there was a man riding along silently.

Choopa had not seen him but understood there was danger as Dandaloo pushed him into a big mass of digger's speedwell, in amongst the flowers as blue as the sky. She herself walked away, feigning a limp. She was too old to interest any brumby hunter, and Choopa was too small. A dog might hurt him, but there was no dog, only a man with a gentle voice saying:

'Don't worry old girl. I know you've got a foal planted somewhere, and you're pretending you're lame, like a mother duck,' and he rode away, lasso in his hand.

Choopa watched the man through a curtain of sky-blue flowers and, because

Dandaloo had put him there, there he stayed. After a while, some of the herd galloped out on to the part of the flat that was in his line of vision. The man on his horse came within sight, too, and the man was edging a fine-looking colt out of the small mob. He did not seem to be trying to catch any other, just that one handsome colt.

Choopa was not close enough to see the rope fly through the air, but he could see that something seemed to bring the man and his horse closer and closer to the colt. Then all three were out of his sight, but Choopa had a cold feeling down his back, making his hair stand up with fear. He pressed himself further into the digger's speedwell, and it closed around him, as though he were part of it.

Presently Dandaloo came back, blew a soft greeting through trembling nostrils, and lay down beside the bushes.

It was dark when the little kangaroos and wallabies appeared. Choopa scrambled his way out of his hiding place, blue flowers, pale in the half light, clinging to his shaggy tufts of forelock and mane.

Because he was very pleased to see them, Choopa did a dance in the only clear space, but Dandaloo wanted water and she led them all off to a spring at the head of a little creek, where snowgrass encircled the bubbling water. As the old mare drank, her dwarf foal danced and the other young animals sat around — all of them calling on something that travelled on the eucalypt-scented south wind, calling for some strength and wonder that they knew was just beyond reach, yet there, close to them, and woven into the spell of the dance.

Darkness fell and this time they all slept just where they sat, enfolded in a pattern of some mystery.

Stars began to glitter above Quambat Flat and over the restless herd that had lost one young colt. Choopa had learnt that the pattern of a dance could make a spell to combat danger, but yet, when he woke at midnight, his skin was creeping with an unknown fear.

### *Her Foal Just Did Not Grow*

A brumby hunter was yet another reason for not going back to the herd, but Dandaloo was longing for the feeling of being *with* the other mares, and the two year olds, the yearlings, and the foals — perhaps it was the feeling of being protected by numbers, and by Son of Storm if he was there. She had felt a sudden happiness when she had reached Quambat Flat.

If only that man had not come and lassoed the colt. So she kept Choopa in the forest country, occasionally in sight of the herd and Choopa and the little kangaroos and wallabies romped. Often they were joined by echidnas and wombats, and soon a family of dingoes came along too.

Choopa simply did not grow. All the other young animals grew and the kangaroos, in particular, began to be higher than his withers, but Choopa was getting very strong. Sometimes he found that he could do a new trick when dancing with his young mates. He might jump about on his hind legs, bow down and then leap up. Then, he would spring in the air and twirl around, and it would seem as if he were hearing music.

Dandaloo watched and enjoyed it all, but she was beginning to long more and more for the company of the herd ... and yet Choopa did not grow. Perhaps all his wonderful tricks would do instead of size ... but the very thought of a bigger horse kicking at him, biting, or throwing him, increased her whole aching love for him.

The kangaroos and wallabies were getting taller, larger — and the collection of young animals that was always close by seemed to multiply, too, for, wherever Dandaloo went seeking fresh grass and cool, clear water, young animals were woven into Choopa's spell-like dance; woven into the dream. Always, as night crept through the bush, all the animals gathered together, and starlight shone in the ring of shining eyes. As the moon rose and Choopa got up from his sleep to dance again, the weaving of his dancing legs — through dark and light, dark and light — seemed to repeat the spell, so that even a mopoke in a branch above watched and wondered.

So they stayed in the forest country, finding fresh green grass near the deep pools that still existed in creeks in spite of the very hot, dry summer. Wherever they went, other little animals would come to the enchanted circle for a night or

so, some of them joining in Choopa's ritual pattern.

The watchers often stayed for hours, even while the dancer and Dandaloo slept within the circle.

It was the third or fourth full moon since Choopa's birth and he had barely grown at all, but he was well muscled, and very strong. Dandaloo had almost ceased to notice that he was so small. But every time her longing for company drove her to move closer to the herd, she would feel a sudden twinge of fear for what might happen to Choopa, and also what might happen to his tribe of little friends, if she did introduce him to the herd.

She was pulled two ways — the natural wish for company on one side, and the fear of what the herd might do to her unnaturally small foal with his oddly flying legs on the other. But she often edged a little closer to the clear country of Quambat Flat, and the herd's grazing ground.

It was from Limestone Creek at the lower end of the flat that the next lot of brumby hunters came. Dandaloo heard the sound of horses moving carelessly through the bush, long before the other animals did.

A wind had been blowing all day, making her nervous, so that she listened more intently than ever. She saw Choopa asleep under a black sallee. He seemed so very small and vulnerable, and for a moment she became one vast wish for the strength to protect him. The intensity of her feeling was conveyed to him by some current, so that he was charged with the power of it. He got up to rub against her, but just as their heads touched he saw — like a shadow in among the shadows of tree trunks — a tall horse and its long-legged rider. They were gone almost before he had seen them.

Dandaloo's hair was tingling. She knew that the horse and man had been there, behind three huge candlebarks.

Choopa and Dandaloo, noses just touching, were as though frozen — still as granite rocks, still as the ice that would come in winter. There were only the faintest sounds, now, and the sounds seemed to be getting further away.

Dandaloo did not think that the man on the tall horse had seen them, but somehow they still could not move.

They waited and listened: the sounds seemed to be moving in the direction of Quambat Flat — slight movement among low branches, of hanging fronds of stringy barks, leaves and buds, brushed by some passing body ... There were stealthy footfalls.

Even little wrens were hopping furtively. A small ground dove emerged from under a fallen branch and vanished into a thicket, but no birds sang. The bush was silent. Then softly, softly, there were more sounds, and Dandaloo and



Choopa both realised that the two of them were in a direct line between these new sounds and the sounds that were going towards the flat. Then there did come a bush warning. A thrush chattered angrily — its ‘keep away, you’ve no business here’ sound.

The stealthy, creeping sounds were slowly getting closer. Choopa’s hair was rising. He was cold, and then he was hot. Sweat broke behind his ears. Dandaloo saw fear in Choopa’s eyes and she wondered, desperately, where they could go. Perhaps they could creep silently out towards the Quambat Ridge.

Suddenly there was no choice. There were more horsemen than she had expected. They were galloping. They were almost on top of Dandaloo and her miniature foal. She would have to take Choopa in the direction in which they were driven, and they would have to go fast ... Choopa could not go fast ... He put up his nose to touch hers and set off with her.

Choopa saw the big horses, heard their hooves thundering on the summer-hard ground. They were even shod with silver shoes. Choopa all at once felt afraid, not just for himself, though he could almost feel himself being run over by one of those great horses, but for the beloved old mother who was going slowly so that she stayed with him.

He could hear heavy horses crashing through the limbs and low shrubs, and his heart was banging against his ribs. Then he could see shadows flickering through bush to one side, racing on, men leaning over their necks, shadows flickering, there they were, horses and horsemen, and then gone, vanishing, appearing — shadows that seemed to be terror itself. Something was behind a black sallee trunk, something, swishing past branches. The movements, broken by trunk and limb, looked disjointed — giant horses quite close, then further away, going fast, faster, faster ...

He knew that Dandaloo was right beside him, her legs by his head. Where were the young kangaroos and wallabies? Then the horses and riders seemed to have raced right away from them, swinging wide, passing them. Dandaloo propped in her tracks and young Choopa stopped beside her. They were at the very edge of the timber.

What was that thundering and hammering inside him, thumping so that his whole blue and white hide shook? Choopa knew he was sobbing for breath, and felt that he could not possibly get enough air. Dandaloo rubbed her head against his, as he collapsed.

A red film clouded his eyes, but he *had* to see what was happening on ahead. Ahead, both groups of men and horses were galloping after the herd.

By evening the flat had been quiet and empty for some hours. The horses with

riders were gone. Nothing moved.

Choopa was sound asleep at Dandaloo's feet, but she still gazed out over the flat and up at the slopes of the Cobberas. Son of Storm appeared halfway down the flat.

Out of the stillness into the sunset light, walking with stately strides, came two cream and silver stallions.

Baringa, King of the south country, and Lightning. They were the real owners of Quambat Flat, though they rarely appeared, having secret hiding places where their mares and silver foals were hidden away.

Dandaloo knew there was a very old friendship between them and Son of Storm. Now she wondered if the two silver stallions had heard the whispers in the snow gum leaves, the tales carried through the treetops by the flying phalangers, gliding from tree to tree, and in the songs of the lyrebirds, telling that an unbelievably small blue and white foal, with some wonderful gift, was in the south country, and that they had come to see for themselves.

Son of Storm was trotting to join those two magnificent horses. Mares and foals were appearing in the open, too. Dandaloo took a deep breath. This might be the time to go out on to Quambat Flat with Choopa.

She began to canter slowly, wanting to reach Son of Storm and the two silver horses before most of the herd did.

She had nudged Choopa, but did not realise that he was still half asleep and so slower than usual. For once, she was looking ahead, rather than back, to see if he were coming.

Choopa found himself getting left behind, and he was frighteningly alone in open country. He must hurry, hurry ... Dandaloo had almost reached the two stallions, and a bunch of mares and foals were coming from the other way. Choopa, trying to gallop faster, felt his flying legs beginning to tangle, almost to knot themselves together.

He saw the earth coming up to meet him. He had a queer muddled picture of the big brown stallion, silver horses, his mother's blue coat, and a collection of yearlings, mares and foals. For a flashed moment his heart gave a lurch of fright, then in a second he gathered his courage and self-possession together — and his sense of fun. He tucked his head under his chest, the way the echidnas had showed him, so that he somersaulted right in front of the three stallions and all the astounded mares and foals — somersaulted, and sprang to his feet, leapt up and twirled in the air, as though the music of the spheres, the unheard rhythm of the stars, had sounded for him.

## *Ball of Fire*

One foal neighed and three or four gathered around Choopa. The three stallions stood with the same strange expression on their faces that the big brown Son of Storm had had when he stood in the dusk looking at the tiny misshapen bundle that was the newborn Choopa — a look of tenderness.

Here was the dwarf blue and white bundle dancing in the last glow of sunset. Had any horse seen such a strange sight? At the fringe of the forest, Dandaloo could see the young kangaroos and wallabies watching timidly.

Then the young foals began edging closer. They only made a crescent audience behind Choopa, a half-circle, because they knew that Choopa was really dancing for the stallions.

Slowly, as darkness crept up the sky, the young kangaroos and wallabies drifted in closer, and there were possums' eyes glowing in the nearest trees. Leaping and bounding, turning and somersaulting, Choopa wove his spell. Occasionally starlight shone in his eyes.

Finally, Choopa dropped down, exhausted.

A wind whispered and faraway one mopoke answered another. High up on the Cobberas, a dingo howled. There was only a sliver of a new moon, so Choopa did not wake to dance again. Dandaloo lay beside him, sleeping calmly, for the silver stallions and Son of Storm, even the mares and foals of the Quambat herd, had accepted Choopa.

High on a ribbon gum on the slopes of the Cobberas, a flying phalanger sat quite silently. One of the mopokes flew on soundless, fanning wings. Trees and leaves, birds and beasts — the bush network of communication was filled with strange tales that night.

At first light, Dandaloo saw that the two silver stallions had gone — melted silently into the bush that hid the entrances to their secret valleys. The south wind and the streams whispered legends of a silver tribe who were seen and then not seen — the greatest stallion of them all sometimes appearing in the form of a white hawk, or becoming a willy-willy, a whirlwind of snow, going up, up, up to melt into the sky.

When Choopa woke he looked around for Baringa and Lightning, half-dreaming of the expression in their eyes, that was more than amusement.

One man had waited behind after the other hunters had gone, and sitting quietly on his horse he had seen the stately arrival at Quambat Flat of the two silver horses.

The giant glider near the top of his ribbon gum, and the mopokes, all had seen him, and they took the message far and wide. No good would come of one man staying behind when the brumby hunters left. There would be no security for any brumbies now that a man on a horse had seen the silver stallions.

News of the hunters, news of the silver stallions so rarely seen, was relayed through the bush. Then came a queer, jumbled story of a very small blue roan and white foal who had somersaulted to the very feet of the great stallions and danced for them on his hind legs, all aglow with the light of the setting sun.

The flying phalanger and the mopokes had gone when dawn came, but already their message was spreading.

Even without listening to the Willy wagtail's ridiculous angry twitterings giving dire warnings of doom, Dandaloo knew in her bones that if any man had sighted the two silver horses, the tales of their presence at Quambat Flat would eventually bring hunters. She knew that she should take her slow-moving Choopa to a place where they would not be found. Perhaps the best place would be in the area of the Limestone Caves. It would be cool there, too, with tea-tree thickets and hollows with little springs of ice-cold water beneath the green fronds of tree ferns. It had been wonderful seeing Baringa and Lightning on Quambat Flat, but undoubtedly the story of their visit would sound through the bush and hunters would soon be about. Son of Storm was too astute to be caught and if hunters became too troublesome she knew he would vanish to the hiding place that was once the grazing ground of his father, Storm.

The old mare led her foal and his young tribe of friends, slowly grazing their way through the bush till they came to a place where there was a shallow crossing of the Limestone; a crossing that even the possums could get over, dry-furred, and where scrub would hide them.

Choopa was always close to his mother's side, but he was beginning to feel a responsibility for the little tribe who followed him, and often looked behind. Perhaps it was not only the dance that evoked a spell. Perhaps it was the circle of shining eyes. Perhaps there really was an unheard music and certainly there was a rhythm that beat in each of the dancers, drumming in their veins and heartbeats.

Daylight, dark; daylight, dark; and dusk the dancing hour — dusk and starlight brought all the crowding spirits out of the bush.

Dandaloo loved the time in the penumbra between evening and night, when all the wild horses that had ever lived seemed to gallop through the air. One old

creamy mare in particular seemed almost to have wings, almost to fly down from the high mountains and to be leading them all on and on to the caves.

The old creamy mare did not let them rest for long that night. When Choopa lay down and slept, she faded away for a while, but then reappeared, and seemed to urge them onwards. Dandaloo began to feel a need to reach safe hiding, something of which that wraith from the night sky had known. Dandaloo did not know if there really was a ghost in the shape of an age-old mare of whom she had heard so much, who embodied all the wisdom of the mountains, but she felt restless ... it was becoming such an eerie night. Giant moths were fluttering and gliding through the forest. What did they mean? Something about light ... light and time?

No time to spare?

Moths brushing their faces. Quick, but go softly ... Quick ... Quick.

Tread softly, for there are dreams. The old mare seems to float on air ... the night is star-inwrought ... the cloths of heaven ...

Choopa saw the spectral mare, saw or felt the crowding memories of wild horses, the spirit of the wild horses, and knew that there was a message. The moths had a message too. Sometimes their whole wings shone in starlight: sometimes their eyes gleamed red. There was something to fear that was neither horse, nor man, nor dog.

Then an absolute quiet came over the bush. Moths seemed to hang motionless. The spirit-horses that had been in the air were still.

Choopa could almost see through the old mare, yet she was there, completely still, and Dandaloo had stopped, one foot raised in mid-stride. Choopa pressed against her. The little animals were all as close as they could get; the baby wombat and little echidna had crept up out of the undergrowth, close to Choopa, close to Dandaloo.

Without a sound, a great ball of light came rushing, spinning through the air ... flying, blazing in the night, brighter than the brightest sunlight ... a white light ... a ball spinning, burning with an intense white light that spread out, right to the rim of the night.

For a fraction of a second Choopa knew that there was something at the edge of the light, but everything was so bright that whatever it was, was blotted out, then a burning twig landed from a tree behind the track of the fireball, and a little flame began to creep into dry leaves.

To the caves, to the caves. They must go like the wind. Not a moment to lose. There was one cave, Dandaloo knew, in which a spring welled up.

Fire! Fire!

The fireball had raced past but the whole world was alight with that

gleaming white light, and now, the red glowing.

Choopa, the little lizard, knew he could not go fast, but he tried — and fell over his flailing forelegs. He somersaulted, and was immediately back on his feet beside his mother, who never left him. The young animals gathered around them, the wombat urging the little echidna to catch up — for they were one, that tribe, all held together by a gossamer spell, a web of thistledown hitched to a star.

There, ahead, was the insubstantial outline of the creamy mare. She seemed to be calling to Dandaloo — one wise, wise old mare of the mountains, soundlessly calling another, guiding her to safe haven.

Bright white light, and then it was fading, leaving the burnished light of the leaping fire — and there was the mouth of the cave, and the clear water of the stream running out of it.

The creamy mare had faded entirely. Dandaloo and the tribe all hurried into the far back of the cave, but Dandaloo called a neigh of thanks to the ancient mare. The fire was coming near to the cave and the darkness was beginning to glow strangely red. First there was the crackling of burning leaves in the tops of the trees, then a burst of noise — a roar — as a tree head exploded. Any moment the fire would be passing over the top of the cave.

Choopa took another great mouthful of water and stepped to the entrance to look out. Flying fronds of bracken, all black and twisted, were landing in the stream. Burning twigs flew past on the wind. Standing there, shaking with fear, he heard a sound that he knew, like the sound made by two dead tree limbs screeving together. Brolgas were calling. Four brolgas were flying across the red smoke-stain that covered the sky; their outstretched legs were red, and their heads a deep, deep red. Their great wings were shadows holding them high as they hurtled along on the fire-wind.

Fiery, red-legged brolgas, they were going so fast that they would not be burnt. They would escape in the air, high above the flames in the treetops.

A man on a horse swung around to get away ...

The sound of the fire seemed to roll around the cave and cover the sound of the crashing branches as the man looked around, and then galloped away. In his mind was a scene such as no one would believe had ever really happened.

When he told the brumby hunters that he had seen a fireball go straight as the flight of a kingfisher lighting everything in a brilliant white light, they believed him, because one of them had seen the fireball and even their camp had been partially lit by the unearthly light. He did not say what they would not believe, that he had seen something else, never to be forgotten, a vision of that old blue mare and her cripple foal, and a mob of joeys and wallabies, an echidna, a

wombat, all standing statue-still as the fireball went past. Even the fear of the bushfire could not erase that vision in the man's mind, nor the memory of the mare and foal and animals making a final race from the fire.

From where he had been, on his horse, the quiet man had not seen the mouth of the cave, only the stream, its water all illuminated with red fire-glow, and the stumbling, somersaulting foal, who for one moment seemed to wear St Elmo's fire upon his ears, like a cap and bells.

The ground in the gully around the cave mouth was too damp for the fire to get a hold, but flames roared through the surrounding forest. The heat was intense, yet there was cool, clear water to drink.

Nearly every animal in the southern end of the mountains had seen the fireball; every bird spoke about it, and murmured of what had been like a stampede of the spirits of dead and gone brumbies before the fireball ... And, when the fierce fire-wind died down, the faintly moving air whispered of the sighting of the ancient creamy mare — she whose bones were bleached on the Ramshead Range so long ago. She had come to the succour of Dandaloo — another matriarch of wise brumby mares.

The blazing picture of a ball of fire had marked the minds of all the wild horses, all the mountain animals, and the ball of fire itself had marked the bush. A man had an inerasable picture burnt into his mind.

Dandaloo and her blue roan dwarf foal, and all the tribe, would go their way into the mountains. The man would go his, back into an ordinary world, with an entirely unordinary vision haunting his mind and memory.

## *Dandaloo Came Galloping*

By bush telegraph — perhaps the wild neighing of horses, perhaps howls of dingoes, something, somehow — the brumby hunters began to feel convinced that some of the Silver Herd were abroad in the mountains. Tales were being told around campfires. At the hut, south of the Cobberas, the Quiet Man sat by the fire saying nothing at all.

Maybe the insubstantial creamy mare had never been there, near the creek, with the old blue roan, and all the 'roos and wallabies ... perhaps even the fireball had been in his imagination ... but no. All the brumby hunters had seen either the fireball or the unearthly light. But they had not seen the tiny foal's ears ablaze.

The Quiet Man was not saying anything. Not for him to spoil the secrets of the bush ... but ... perhaps it would be exciting at least to see a silver stallion. Silver brumbies, of course, should run free.

The cave, cool and damp and provided with ice-cold fresh water, was a wonderful place while the ground all around was hot, but when finally Dandaloo went outside, seeking food, she found that almost no grass or pod-bearing bushes were left unburnt. She looked over the black landscape, noted the little wisping willy-willies of ash and occasional smoke, and was anxious. Already she was very hungry, and even with that spring water to drink her milk had become less. Choopa must have milk, *must grow*. Every time they escaped danger, she felt Choopa's vulnerability even more sharply.

If they left that sweet water, what if they never found grass?

The time came when they had to move.

So much of the mountain country had been burnt, and the blackened landscape was frightening. Whenever they went steeply uphill, the gumnuts that had showered down off the trees were like ball-bearings under their hooves. Choopa fell rather often. Once they found a dying kangaroo, its tail burnt, and it could not hop to water. There was nothing they could do. It lay near a wavy white line of ash, and it looked at them with pleading eyes.

They did find small pockets of grass along the Indi River, where unburnt shrubs had seed pods hanging over the water. One of these little pockets would provide food for a day, perhaps two, but only for Dandaloo and her foal and the



tribe, not for quite a number of horses.

In spite of being anxious about the amount of grazing, Dandaloo was pleased to see the shape of a horse coming through the trees, and guessed that it was Son of Storm as it blended into the trunks of swamp gum and black sallees. She knew, as he came trotting to greet her, that he was pleased to find her quite safe after the fire.

Choopa stood half-hidden in a prostanthera bush, shyly looking at the big horse, but then, remembering how the three stallions had looked almost amused at his somersault and dancing, he did a few dancing steps towards him, and the noble, gentle stallion bowed his head down to touch that blotched, blue-and-white head.

Dandaloo gave a little sigh. Son of Storm would be a good friend to Choopa. A few of the Quambat herd had followed Son of Storm and they now stood with him.

Ever since the fireball and the bushfire, she had been edgy, worried for the safety of her foal, and the safety of the tribe, part of her family now, but the tribe had the natural ability to escape. Choopa was too slow to be able to save himself. Somehow he should have grown, in these last frightening days and nights. But he had not grown.

A dry, singed, heat-curved leaf fell on to her rump, and she jumped with fright.

Son of Storm looked at her swiftly. Mares were often more sensitive to the approach of danger, and he wondered ... The foal was certainly far too small to protect itself, or to escape danger from fire, or flood, or blizzard — or from men and their dogs.

Both Son of Storm and Dandaloo knew that rain must come after fire, and they were thinking more about rain and grass than danger. In fact it was as if the world stood still in an uneasy, charred, black time — no green growth, no birds singing, and cold, cold nights. Into this silent, black, unmoving world, there came a sound.

A dog barked.

Son of Storm quickly began to gather the mares and foals together and drive them off into the timber. Close-growing trees could defeat men, or at least let a herd split into as many parts as there were brumbies.

Choopa had no hope of keeping up. Son of Storm did not try to force him, but let Dandaloo and her foal stay behind, and out on one side.

All the galloping hooves of the brumbies created a cloud of dust and ash; ash got up their nostrils. But nothing, neither dust, nor ash, could muffle the sound of horses and dogs coming swiftly through the blackened forest.

Dandaloo tried dropping out further and further to one side, but then it was altogether too late. There was a dog at her heels and a stockman on either side, forcing her into the mob of mares and foals that they were rounding up. The strong smell of sweat, the smell of fear, rose around her. Her flanks were touching other flanks, chestnut and brown. Choopa. Choopa could have been knocked over and trampled; she could not see him at all. She dug in her hooves and stopped dead, then swung, crashing into a big chestnut mare, but there was a stockman just behind. Dandaloo reared, flailing with her forelegs, attacking him with her bared teeth. A furious man's voice swore, and then said:

'I'll get you, you devil!'

Another voice called: 'She's old ... leave her,' but the first man shouted: 'No. She's crazy. I'll teach her.'

But Dandaloo was desperately fighting to get back to find Choopa.

Then a voice called: 'Well come on. Keep her in the mob now, or we'll lose 'em,' and Dandaloo was driven into a mob of mares and yearlings that a third man was bringing in from one side. There were whips cracking, dogs barking, and men shouting and cursing.

Choopa could not see what was happening. He lay down, his heart thumping at his ribs, fear and grief turning the sweat on his hide to ice.

Then, in a cloud of ash and dust, the mob of mares were going, going far ahead, leaving ... and trailing behind were a few part-grown foals. Choopa struggled to his feet, planted them firmly and neighed with all his strength, calling Dandaloo, who had never left him before.

Then he started off with the other foals, following the cloud of ash. His tribe followed behind, staying half-hidden in the charred bush.

Choopa tried to hurry, following the sound of whips and dogs, but the noise and the cloud only got further away, and he was becoming very tired. He stumbled on and on, now and then dropping on to the black ground, exhausted.

At last he could not get up and start again. There was a little muddy stream close to where he had fallen down, and he stretched his nose out to drink. Then, still sobbing for breath, he fell into a half-sleep. His tribe crept around closely. Presently the other young foals missed him, and came back, because surely the little dancer, the spellmaker, would lead them back to the herd.

Choopa lay asleep.

One of the young kangaroos went foraging and found a bush with a few seed pods still hanging on to it, and brought a branch for him, nudging him awake.

Although Choopa was grateful for the offering of food, the biggest thing in his mind was his missing mother. The seed pods stuck in his dry throat, but he munched them and rubbed his head against the little 'roo. The tribe drew in

closer around him, and some of the foals crept in, too, till they were touching in a magic circle. There they all were when the dark of the night began to rise from the burnt mountain earth. There they were, waiting for a frightening, lonely night — legs, shoulders, heads, fur and hair, even the echidna's spikes, all touching, — and warmth and comfort flowed through them.

A little light was coming from the rising moon when, half-asleep, they heard the sound of distant cantering hooves.

Choopa sprang up, alert, ears pricked, heart thumping, a neigh half-stifled with wild longing, and then he began to dance. He danced on his hind legs out of the ring of young animals, and they left the space open for Choopa to come back with his mother into the circle. For there in the faint moonlight was the old blue roan mare rearing up to meet the dancer. Choopa danced around and around her, leading her inside the circle.

There was a sort of rustling, a joyous sound as all the other animals, even the foals, began to dance around them. Dandaloo was the only one of the captured brumbies to return.

At the brumby hunters' camp, the Quiet Man had ridden in last of all, and saw the old mare pushing against the rails of the yard.

'Let her go,' he had said. 'She's old, and she has a crippled foal,' and he himself lowered the sliprail and let Dandaloo out.

## *Shadow of a Man on the Snowgrass*

The first great rainstorm that Choopa had ever experienced came at least two weeks after the fire. The small rain, falling almost like mist, was very good when it started, making his coat feel soft and pliable, but when the drops became bigger and colder, and were beating and splashing off shoulders and rump, it was really too much. The drops got right into his eyes and his eyelashes were matted together. His back kept shivering. He was glad when Dandaloo took him under a great shelter of interlaced black sallee limbs and some thick-growing tea-tree. A whipbird probably lived there, because his whip crack call went on until dark.

Choopa was rather hungry. Dandaloo's milk had been drying up a little, since there was no green feed after the fire, but also because she had experienced such terror during the brumby hunt, when she was caught and separated from Choopa. Now she was gently scratching his cold, matted, blue back with her teeth. Dandaloo knew that, unless cold weather came too soon, the rain would save their lives. Grass would grow, and shrubs that had been scorched would put out new leaves; the mountain world would be renewed. Surely Choopa would grow, as everything else would grow, with the awakening of the mountains.

Even the day after the rain had stopped, a greenish mist seemed to be creeping slowly over the earth. Translucent green, and red, and copper-coloured little thin leaves appeared quite quickly up the trunks of the most severely burnt trees. Silver-blue young leaves suddenly became visible on the eurabbie blue gums.

The first birds came back and began to sing — magpies celebrating life. Soon the currawongs' clear call seemed to descend from the brilliant sky at evening. Joy sounded in the bush again.

Choopa heard his own name called by yellow-faced honeyeaters, who had come back to see if their nesting place had survived. The same day, he saw a robin redbreast flitting among some bushes. The whole world was springing into life from charred wood and ash. Happiness began to flare once more, just as the eyebrights began to send up clusters of buds that would burst into lilac or even purple flowers, to make an autumn flowering.

Choopa was always doing dancing steps of joy around Dandaloo. He was so glad to have her safely back with him that, more than ever, he stayed very close to her.

They found Son of Storm again. He was not grazing Quambat Flat and he was being very careful to keep well hidden. With him was a mare, a buckskin, daughter of Boon Boon and Thowra, the famous silver stallion. Boon Boon had taught her daughter much of the lore of the mountains.

Some mares were legends of mountain wisdom, and the greatest of all was the long-gone creamy mare, Bel Bel, dam of the Silver Brumby, and another was Boon Boon, the Silver Brumby's first-chosen mate. Son of Storm knew that the spirit of Bel Bel had come to Dandaloo when the fireball was about to set the bush alight, and had bestowed some of her greatness, some of her own courageous wisdom, on Dandaloo. Now, Son of Storm brought Boon Boon's daughter, Wingilla, to Dandaloo so that they would make a close-knit friendship. Wingilla, of course, knew some of the great secrets that must never be told. Had she not come, Thowra's and Boon Boon's daughter, from the place that was the greatest secret of all.

'One day ...' Son of Storm thought to himself. 'One day ...' But who knew what lay ahead? Who knew ...? Who could tell what was ahead in space and in time — ahead in the lifespan of an old mare and her comic, loving, wistful foal?

Choopa did a shy little dance for Wingilla and then saw the filly foal behind her, and his dance became an invitation to join in a game. This filly was a dark brown with the same golden mane and tail which Wingilla had. She had the kind expression in her eyes that Son of Storm had inherited from Storm, his sire.

Dandaloo rubbed her nose around the little filly's face.

Every time the young ones romped away from the covering tree ferns, the tea-tree and blanketwoods, Son of Storm would call them back until they would be hidden again.

He was obviously nervous and keeping a lookout all the time. Sometimes a branch screeving against another, or a distant currawong call, might almost sound like a voice. Dandaloo had never ceased to be jumpy since the brumby drive. Now she realised that Wingilla was nervous too, and that she was quietly edging them all further down the creek. Neither she, nor Wingilla, nor Son of Storm saw the man who stood as still as a tree on a rocky promontory that looked down on the creek. It was when Choopa leapt out from under the umbrella fronds of a tree fern into a clear patch of grass, and danced there for Wingilla and the foal, that, for the first time, he felt he was being watched — felt, and understood, the sensation of eyes almost piercing his hide.

Neither of the young ones made any sign or sound to indicate that they had seen or felt anything unusual. To make himself feel better, Choopa danced a few steps and turned two somersaults.

Later, Dandaloo got the faintest scent of a strange horse, and the smell of

saddlery, and felt sure someone had been there. Son of Storm and Wingilla must have known, too, because they immediately followed Dandaloo away. Dandaloo saw that Wingilla was upset and anxious, she also knew that the lovely young mare was one of the few keepers of the Secrets — and that she would never willingly let the key to the Secrets be learnt by others ... but, if the safety of her foal was at risk ... would she take her, quickly, to one of the secret hiding places which might then never be secret again?

The Quiet Man melted away and was swallowed up in the dense, dark swampgums and black sallees, only a faint scent remaining. There was a picture in his memory, too — of the queer blue and white foal turning somersaults.

The Quiet Man was not a talker, not a yarn-spinner around the camp fire, but somehow there began to waft over the mountains a half-told tale, a half-imagined story, floating on the wind, and sometimes another lone man would go out into the mountains to try to find out if there was any foundation to this half-dreamt fable that was fading into the mists.

Dandaloo might have ceased to notice that Choopa did not grow, if it had not been that they now ran with Wingilla and her foal, and the filly did grow. She was a late foal, too, but she soon began to look big when she joined the circle made by Choopa's tribe.

The flying phalanger had glided away during the fire, but now it returned to one of its favourite trees, gliding from one tall tree to the foot of another, and telling its tales of travel as it climbed that one, calling out as it sailed down from treetop into the bush. Thus tales had been spread, further than Suggan Buggan, perhaps to the Pinch River, even, perhaps, far down the Snowy to where the pine trees grew.

It was the sweet scent of the white heath bushes at the end of a warm summer's day that finally made Dandaloo's longing for the high country get too strong to resist. Her restlessness infected Son of Storm too, for he had often wandered far over the Great Divide, as his father had with Thowra.

Choopa, though so small and short-legged, was now very strong. It seemed as if it were almost something to do with Choopa that had formed itself into a quest in Dandaloo's mind, invading her dreams, becoming an obsession. And the memory of the lakes held a strong attraction for that wise old blue roan: Lake Cootapatamba, high enough to be a drinking place for eagles; the Blue Lake, deep even at the edge; the double lake, Albina, below steep cliffs, lying in the Northcote Canyon. Dandaloo had drunk at the double lake once, and felt so wonderful that the memory remained vivid. Perhaps Choopa would grow if he drank at the topmost lakes. Obsession or dream, they had to go to those lakes in

the high country. They had been through fire: now there must be water, the water of the highest lakes.

Dandaloo always used to be a wanderer, and so had Son of Storm. Wingilla had never before left Boon Boon and Thowra's Secret Valley, not until Son of Storm had come around the cliffs, one dark night, to claim her. So many of the tales of the Ramshead Range were part of the legends of their lives that she was eager to keep on travelling, exploring ...

Along the rather wide valley of the Tin Mine Creek, the golden podolepis daisies were flowering thickly — four golden heads, or perhaps six, on each tall plant. Choopa was not very much taller than the plants, as he threaded his way through them, his strange little blotchy face peering through the brilliant, golden flowers — sometimes dancing with excitement among them, sometimes leading Wingilla's daughter a 'tug you last' game through them.

Dandaloo stood, half asleep in the sunshine beside Son of Storm. She could see Choopa's kangaroo mates in the bush, close by, and one of them sitting among the golden daisy heads, little paws folded, almost as though it knew it looked beautiful. Choopa went up to it and rubbed its head with his nose, but all of a sudden it became alert, sitting up straighter, ears pricked, listening, eyes staring into the bush.

Dandaloo and Son of Storm looked quickly in the direction in which the 'roo was gazing, as though some danger lurked there. There was nothing to be seen, and yet ... somebody, something, must have been about, even if only an emu hidden in the bush, because this fable began to be whispered on the south breeze, of the smallest blue roan foal imaginable, playing and dancing among the golden podolepis, up the valley of the Tin Mine Creek ...

The little band of brumbies reached the flats where the Ingegoodbee River headed, just on sunset. Here small, steep-sided pools held sweet spring water, peat pools, reflecting the sunset sky. The reflecting water was pale, duck-egg blue, rifted with rose pink, just as the sky was rifted and feathered with cloud.

Dandaloo, Choopa and those of his tribe who had travelled with him, went to drink at the pools. Son of Storm and Wingilla led their foal out on to the flat, too. The springs at the source of the river were enfolded in an ancient peace. Three wild duck were floating on one pool. Two other ducks winged across the lovely sky.

There was a circle of snowgrass among the pools, a splendid rolling place for them all, and when the stallion, the mares and the foals had rolled and rolled, Choopa sprang up, rearing and dancing.

The higher land above the head of the Ingegoodbee is full of wombat

burrows, and from these holes very young wombats peered out, watching the visiting band of brumbies, and then scuttling down to get closer and closer to the ring of young animals around Choopa till they, too, became part of the circle.

One very young wombat, with soft grey fur, was fascinated by Choopa's dancing and his flying legs. The wombat's small eyes followed every movement of the blue roan foal, and his head began to go around, too, swaying round and round. Soon the tiny eyes kept flickering shut.

All of a sudden there was a splash! The little wombat had overbalanced and fallen into one of those sky-reflecting pools.

Choopa, startled, dropped out of a rear, and looked at the floundering, round, wet ball of wombat, just as a dingo grabbed a mouthful of grey fur on the wombat's non-existent neck, and heaved it out of the water. Choopa rubbed his face against the wet face of the baby wombat. The pinpoint, round eyes looked adoringly at him through wet lashes.

His mother came trundling across the flat and claimed the sopping wet bundle. Night settled, and the circle of animals disbanded and went off on foraging expeditions, or curled up to sleep, listening to the sound of possums and giant gliders, or the faraway howl of a dingo, and the strange cry of a bittern.

Dandaloo and Son of Storm were both restless, dreaming of the high country, and of the high country lakes. It was the memory of the lakes that called them — Cootapatamba and the deep, deep Blue Lake, and the double lake below the steep cliffs of the Northcote Canyon, in which Dandaloo had once drunk and felt renewed.

Choopa must drink at these highest lakes whose water must be the very water of life.

The baby wombat was there, looking for Choopa, in the morning, trying to follow them when they started on their journey to the high mountains.

Over and over again, in the next few days, Son of Storm got the feeling that they were being watched. He never saw anyone, but so much had happened here, and still somehow existed in the very shape of the landscape.

In the Cascades, the great stallion, Yarraman, Son of Storm's grandsire, had ruled for years. Thowra and Storm had been here as mischievous foals and yearlings. The Brolga had defeated Yarraman, here, and then Thowra had returned here as King of the Cascade brumbies years later, after he had defeated The Brolga.

If anyone, man or horse, had been watching them there, they might have seen, as night came on, the little cavalcade of brumbies, led by the blue roan mare, threading its way, in single file, up the bare slopes out of the Cascades.



Dandaloo, in the lead, with the so-small blue roan foal climbing close beside her. Wingilla and her filly foal following close, and dear, faithful Son of Storm bringing up the rear.

They rested among the snow gums that were on either side of a lovely saddle where the white-cupped gentiana trembled in the gentle south breeze, and from where they could see the rocky peaks of the Ramshead Range.

Dandaloo was tingling with excitement. The marvellously loved country, the thrilling country, was ahead of them. There were the peaks among which she had galloped when she was very young, when the red-and-white Hereford cattle grazed the high country, where, perhaps, one might catch a fleeting glimpse of Bel Bel with her silver foal at foot. No road had gone through Dead Horse Gap when Bel Bel roamed, but now they would have to cross the gap at night, and they would have to hurry across, into the thick snow gums, at the place where a hut once had been.

Son of Storm was being very wary. The road belonged to men much more than the old hut ever had, but the old hut was gone. No billy was hanging on a wire hook near the door that was no longer there — no billy to blow in the wind and frighten Thowra and Storm when they were curious two-year-olds. There was no smell of smoke, now, no high-fence yards out of which Thowra had stolen Golden.

It seemed to Dandaloo that memories ... action ... spirits were all around them ... in every whispering tussock of snowgrass ... in every rustling cluster of leaves.

Choopa and the filly foal, Bri Bri, were infected by the excitement — feeling very strongly the presence of all that had happened here, over all those long years of sun and of snow.

A strange little summer mist flowed up from the Crackenback River, that night in which they crossed Dead Horse Gap, as though to hide the man-made road and muffle the sound of their hooves on its hard surface, and this mist seemed to hold the shadow of the old hut and long-gone yards, the wonderful grace of Thowra leaping the high fence.

Through the mist they flitted across the Gap, like ghosts themselves, but this time there were no silver horses — only Wingilla, daughter of the Silver Brumby and Boon Boon, and her foal, Bri Bri, by Son of Storm. Thus it was, that those of the bloodlines of the two great friends, Thowra and Storm, were back in the high mountains, climbing upwards, alongside the old blue roan mare and her dwarf foal — the spellmaker.

Silently through the drifting summer mist, and up through the snow gum thickets they climbed, and then grazed their way onwards and upwards, feeling

quite safe now they were leaving the road behind them. At last they passed a big build-up of rocks and the ridge flattened out a little, and the snow gums became more wide spaced.

First light came sliding up the Crackenback River Valley, throwing long mysterious shadows of rock and trees. Then, suddenly, Dandaloo saw one shadow on its own — a long, stretched out shape of a man standing on top of a big rock.

A dream? The shadow moved on the snowgrass and was gone. The man who had been standing on a great rock, whose shadow had been made by the rising sun, slid down behind a tree, and watched the cavalcade move on slowly, up the ridge, watched the little blue-roan colt dance his way through beams of early sunlight, and the dewdrops on his fetlocks made spangles of sunlight swinging on his legs.

A currawong flew over, calling, calling. It saw the man and it saw the brumbies: it saw the excited jiggling, prancing of the two foals. There was the dwarf, the spellmaker of whom the birds of the air had all been singing for the space of several moons — the one of whom the flying phalanger had spread such unbelievable tales.

Streams and birds, and whispering grass might tell the tales, and the giant glider too, but slowly the men who walked and the men who rode were also beginning to have their stories of the blue roan dancing foal.

The brumbies climbed on. They went quite slowly so they would not tire out the two foals. By morning they were hiding in the last of the snow gums just below the lovely grass basin, big and wide and steep-sided, below the rocky tors of the South Ramshead.

The man had skirted around, out of sight of the horses, out of any drift of air that might carry his scent.

From a crevice between the two rocky tors, he saw the brumbies emerge carefully from the gnarled snow gums on a little rocky knoll, saw them in the snowgrass basin, saw them start to roll.

He stood quite still and watched.

The horses were obviously enjoying themselves — the old blue mother and the brown stallion seemed to know all the best rolling places, seemed to know the red-tipped pardalote who called ‘witty-chu’ from the topmost line of snow-bent trees, knew that the bird’s call, or that of its son or grandson, would sound for many years.

The man was still about, hours later. Dandaloo had led them all up as high as they could climb on the South Ramshead. The man saw them silhouetted against the sunset sky.

They stood at the edge, above the steep drop into the Leatherbarrel Creek, looking across at the highest mountains.

The man saw that there was an eagerness in each one, as though they were on the verge of finding out some secret which they sought. That blue dwarf got up and did a twirling, whirling, leaping dance that looked as if it were a celebration of the sunset and the mountains. He was on a small snowgrass platform between two rocky tors and he took off with a few galloping strides into the basin, but he seemed to fall over those strangely swinging legs. He fell and somersaulted, sprang up and fell again, somersaulting in a glow of sunset light.

The man barely believed what he had seen — a faery tableau in a children's pantomime.

## *The Man, the Blizzard and the Brumbies*

The high tops of the mountains! Bare rolling tops, and rocky peaks like Targangil, steep western cliffs and gullies. All high, wild mountains breed wild, wild weather. Fierce storms may suddenly come out of a clear day in such places as this.

The man on foot knew about storms, here in these mountains, and one in particular which had nearly brought death and disaster to a scientific expedition, long, long ago. It was because the storm had nearly wiped out the expedition, near Lake Cootapatamba, and because the man had seen the big painting done by the artist on the expedition, that he was thinking about it. The artist, von Guerard, came from Vienna where Franz had lived and worked. That painting depicted a clear and lovely day, like this day, but the man knew that 'out of the blue' a storm had come. The storm separated the expedition members, one being lost for so long that they thought him dead, another collapsing, and their poor, patient packhorse, Tommy, tethered to a rock of the South Ramshead, nearly dying of exposure.

Tommy was in the man's thoughts, too, because as he noticed a thin line of cloud, far to the north-west, he also noticed that old blue roan mare, the one he had seen on the Ramshead Ridge. He saw her go down to drink at Lake Cootapatamba, and saw her ridiculous foal gallop to the water's edge, fall, and then somersault into the bright water of the lake.

It was late in the day, too late, perhaps, to be in such an exposed place, but the man — who was experienced in the mountains of his own homeland — had set up a tent on the further side of Mt Etheridge, well sheltered, and he was quite sure of his safety. He should have thought more deeply. That rocky mountain used once to be called Dead Horse Mountain, because a mob of brumbies had died there, so long ago, caught by a bitter snowfall and yarding themselves. It was here, too, where two skiers had died some years back.

He saw that the old blue roan was fidgety, and that the noble-looking brown stallion was quietly gathering up the two foals and the young buckskin filly.

Suddenly, out of the blue, the wind was roaring down from the high, domed mountain, rampaging in fog and cloud over the pass at the head of the lake. The lake vanished. The brumbies vanished. The big snowdrift above Cootapatamba was completely hidden by the driven clouds.

The wind hurled the man against a rock, tore at him. He gripped a slab of granite with his ungloved hands, and hung on. He thought he heard a frenzied neigh — a foal's neigh — but he could see nothing. His eyelids were beaten together, glued by tears, and flying cloud, and grit, and even wind-borne sugary particles of summer-hard snow from the drift.

It was a little blue roan foal with strangely misshapen legs that he was wondering about. How would anything so small withstand a wind of such strength? Anyway, how could these brumbies find shelter? The man knew he would have to fight his way around to the other side of Etheridge to find his tent — if it were still there.

Once, as he tried to struggle across the raging wind, he thought a horse was in the cloud just ahead of him, and the faint, ghostly shape of a very small foal ... After that, just the darkness of wild, black cloud, grey fog, and wind.

Son of Storm had realised that the wind was coming just before it hit them, and he had marshalled his little herd. Almost immediately it was obvious that neither of the foals would be able to fight their way through the gale. All he could do was try to keep them all together, and go with the wind, but they would have to get around the head of the lake first.

Choopa tried, with all his courage and determination, to keep going. The appalling strength of the wind flung him off balance, and he kept falling, and they made no progress at all.

Dandaloo stayed beside her foal as though they were nearly glued to each other. Son of Storm tried to force Wingilla to stay with the old mare and keep Bri Bri with her — but Bri Bri was feather-light; the wind just picked her up and blew her away, and they could not see her. The little filly gave a terrified neigh, as she disappeared into the grey fog. Choopa heard her and struggled up to try to get to her, went a few steps and was blown over again. He fell into the little gully where the white purslane grew, and Dandaloo quickly lay down beside him, on the windward side, to protect him, and put one foreleg over him so that the wind could not carry him away.

They heard a cry carried in the wind, but there was nothing she could do except save her foal. She was tired and old, and the wind was full of voices. They might freeze where they lay. She pressed even closer to Choopa, trying to warm him. Twice a man or a shadow seemed to stumble past in the impenetrable fog.

There was no sign of Son of Storm or Wingilla and her foal. Cloud and fog enfolded them, and it was so cold.

She raised her head and neighed, calling Son of Storm. An answer came — a

neigh all shredded and carried away by the wind. She curled her body closer round her foal.

She could not see Son of Storm through the blasting cloud, could not see him somehow forcing Bri Bri to stay between Wingilla and himself, as they fought their way back towards her call. Then Son of Storm was pushing Bri Bri and Wingilla to lie down beside Choopa, and he lay on the windward side of them all.

Was a man near? Did something go past?

Huddled together, the little group of horses were not frozen, though Son of Storm, protecting them all from the wind, was fearfully cold — making himself endure.

The clouds hurtled past, filling the sky, constantly moving, but always there, pouring over them with never a break. Each horse, except Choopa who was nearly covered by Dandaloo's legs, felt their hide stung with wind-whipped sprigs of heath, twigs and gravel.

Did a man go reeling, stumbling past again? Were there other horses calling with faint voices in the storm?

Dandaloo felt Choopa's warmth, as he lay cradled by her legs and her body and with Bri Bri on his other side. She wondered about 'the tribe'. It was lucky they had stayed well into the timber on the other side of Dead Horse Gap.

The man's tent, though made to stand up in an antarctic wind, had gone. At least, he did not locate it. He walked and walked till he fell into a dry, wind-scooped hollow below a rock, and there he stayed till the wind abated, some time during the night. When he came out from under the rock, at first light, snow powdered the mountains.

After sunshine had warmed the world, he began to wonder if he had ever seen that little mob of brumbies. Had he dreamt seeing them huddled in a heap in the worst darkness of the storm?

Later, in Jindabyne, he might never have mentioned the brumbies lost in the storm, if a stockman in the pub had not asked him where he had sheltered from the blizzard, and said that there had been a lot of brumbies die there, once. Without thinking before he spoke, the man told of the group of horses he had seen, and said that among them was a very small blue roan, part-crippled foal.

The stockman took notice, and his interest somehow made the man careful to say no more. After all, what was true and what might be dreams caused by exhaustion — even fear? But why was that stockman so curious? Maybe he was not just imagining that there was something very unusual about that foal.

The next day he drove his car up to the pass above the Snowy River, and

walked along the road to Etheridge and the Seaman's Memorial Hut. He had not meant to go out in the mountains again, immediately, but for some reason he felt he must know if that foal had died there by Lake Cootapatamba.

The stockman had said that it was strange: 'We saw an old blue mare and a very small foal, but they were near Quambat Flat. They survived the fire all right, and we caught the mare after the fire, but she was let go, she's that old.' He had turned to a man sitting quietly eating his lunch. The man nodded.

The first stockman had gone on: 'We should've kept her and the foal. My kids would have liked to have the foal. I reckon it will not live through the winter anyway.' Then he had looked puzzled. 'I can't think that it and its mother would have got right up to Kosci.'

The man, Franz, was still thinking about all that the stockman had said. He walked along the road and hopped across the shallow crossing, near one of the heads of the Snowy River, where there were more boulders, and the water was shallow.

When he reached the ridge on which the Seaman's Memorial Hut stood, he could look across at the place where he had set up his tent, at the feet of the Etheridge rocks. There was no sign of the tent. He would walk over, later, to look. First he wanted to get to Cootapatamba. There were several things that he wanted to know: How much had he imagined in that wild storm? Had the horses really huddled together? Were they alive, now, or dead?

There was no obvious sign of a horse.

He went down from Rawson's Pass to the shore of the lake, half-expected to see a blue roan foal lying dead at the edge of the water and perhaps its mother too. There was nothing.

He had a queer vision in his mind of a heap of horses lying together. He felt he had almost fallen into a little hollow with them — but there was no heap of bodies. He found himself walking beside a little gully that ran down to the lake. White purslane grew thickly, filling the gully. As he looked, he saw that some of it was uprooted, some of it squashed. There were indeed hoof marks and in one place the indentation of a very small front hoof.

So he did not dream it: perhaps they had all lain down in this very shallow gully: perhaps he really had seen those horses lying close together: perhaps the clouds had lightened just sufficiently for him to make out their heaped-together bodies. But where were they now?

The only answer he got to his questions was the aftermath of the storm whipping the lake into big waves, and no sign of a little blue roan foal and his mother. If they lived near Quambat Flat, that foal must have managed the long

distance and the climb. After all, he had seen the little band climbing up on to the South Ramshead.

They might even go back that way.



### *Blue and White Foal Poised in a Rear in Lake Albina*

Snow had fallen, bitter cold, on blue roan hides, brown, and buckskin. Neither Dandaloo nor Son of Storm were surprised by the frozen touch of the wind-driven flakes, nor, when first light came, the white dusting over snowgrass and rocks. Wingilla, too, had seen snow before, in Thowra's Secret Valley, but Choopa was amazed at the sight. Amazement made him jump away from the cold touch of snow on his ear tips. Then there came the blinding brightness, when the sun's oblique rays came from under a bank of cloud and turned the snow-dusted grass into glittering silver.

The two foals chased each other around, bucking, rearing, sliding, tossing up clouds of snow, while the warmth of life flowed through them again, and when they rolled, their coats shone with snow crystals.

There was no man to see them — no one to see the buckskin shining like gold, and the blue roan seeming like part of the sky, his mane spangled, his blue and white hide starred all over.

Dandaloo saw her star-dusted foal, and she began to leap and buck herself. That ugly foal seemed so beautiful. She knew, now, that even if he did not grow, already the high mountains were conferring some strength on him. Already the snow, which might have killed, had given the kind of blessing which she could understand. She was old now and had lived for so long with the wild mountain seasons, lived at the sources of rivers, and, over and over again, been part of creation when she gave birth to foals. She was an old mare, and wise. She felt the spirit of Bel Bel which had come to her at the time of the ball of fire, when the bush was set alight.

What was ahead now? Bel Bel's bones had bleached on the South Ramshead ... during the night's blizzard, the cloud-buffed mountains had seemed to be peopled by many horses of long ago, and even the men who had been lost here ... particularly one man who seemed to be with them.

Usually if a day dawns clear and fine after a big storm, clouds gather again quickly. This day stayed fine. The snow soon melted. Only little pockets of it remained in hollows in which foals could roll.

Dandaloo gave Son of Storm a gentle nudge, and led off, up on to Rawson's Pass and then higher up still, on to a track that led round one of the main heads

of the great Snowy River. This was a wide, gravelly track that had been cut into the mountainside by men. Dandaloo led at a trot. She did not go too fast for Choopa, but she was quite definitely going very purposefully, as though making some sort of pilgrimage, or celebration. Indeed, each one of the five brumbies was celebrating their survival, thrilled with the enjoyment of being alive.

Sometimes Dandaloo would give a cheerful prance or two, and her foal would do a few dancing steps on his hind legs.

Dandaloo knew that Choopa could trot on and on for a long way, so she was unworried about the distance they would have to go. Her longing for the Blue Lake — and Albina — had become an obsession since the terrible storm at Cootapatamba. Presently they were trotting along the crescent curve of the Northcote Pass. They were strung out in single file because the pass and the track were narrow, and they were — all five — silhouetted against the skyline for anyone to see ... but there was no one. Perhaps the birds alone saw the blue roans, the browns, and the buckskin daughter of Thowra.

Below them, on the west side, was that double lake, Albina, beautiful and enticing, but Dandaloo had made up her mind to go to the large, round, deep Blue Lake first, and come back by Lake Albina. They must stand in both lakes ... drink at them deeply, receive whatever it was that they had to give.

The gravelly track turned upwards after going round a rock bluff, and went steeply up on to the spine of the Range. Dandaloo and Son of Storm had both been up there, on the very top of the range. They both knew the excitement of having steep drops on either side.

There was another lake, held within arms of almost vertical cliffs, and when they had passed that, there was still quite a long way to go on that man-made track that winds along the spine of the mountains.

The shining Snowy River was at the foot of the gentler slopes to the east, and on the other side was the deep gorge of the Geehi River. The five horses were too far above to hear the sound of the Geehi, but Dandaloo knew it sung of great mysteries.

For each of the brumbies, every touch of a hoof on the track increased the thrilling excitement of their journey. They climbed on to the top of Carruther's Peak, and the miles and miles of mountains completely overawed the two foals. A man walking alone, down on the road towards Kosciusko, filled Dandaloo with a certain unease, but she soon forgot him, because he was a long way away.

If there was one man, of course, there might be more, but there were no cattle 'on the tops' now, no men on horses riding around the cattle, no blue heeler dogs or slim black kelpies. She remembered that man who had stood on the rock above Dead Horse Gap — he had thrown such a long, long shadow

across the snowgrass ... a shadow that seemed to stretch on and on. Even that long shadow, and the man far away on the road, could not really worry Dandaloo in her present mood. Her foal had survived the blizzard, and here they were on the high track. She felt as though she were feather-light, skipping along the track, then they were there. She saw the dark cliffs first, and then the sparkling blue water of the great, round lake.

They were standing on a loose shale and snowgrass slope. It was studded with eyebrights, paper daisies, golden everlastings and white purslane, and the scent of the lemon-gold cushions of *Stackhousia* rose around them.

Then they hurried down to where the lake overflowed and made the beginning of the Blue Lake Creek, which would eventually become a big stream flowing into the Snowy. Dandaloo and Son of Storm buried their noses in the water to drink. Then they stood gazing. They had been here before. This was a place of dreaming.

Dandaloo turned her head to look at Choopa. He was standing among the golden everlastings, right at the edge of the water. This was quite a different lake from the Cootapatamba. He would not yet plunge in. The slope down which they had galloped — trotted, bucked — was the only comparatively gentle one around this steeply-enclosed circle of water. Somehow Choopa knew that the lake was very deep. It was the memory of this magic water, this magic place, that had so obsessed Dandaloo, and made her so anxious to bring her dwarf foal here. She led him in, and watched him leaping and splashing.

It was when he stood still for a moment, exhausted, that he heard voices, and he, with his sharp hearing, was the only one of the five who heard them.

Men on foot did not yet send any shock waves of fear through him, and voices — unless they were shouting and mingled with the sound of whips cracking — meant nothing. He could not understand the words, the exclaimed, 'Blue horses in the Blue Lake!'

The warning cries of two black cockatoos who flew over were much more alarming. Dandaloo heard them, as did Son of Storm.

Only Choopa had seen the men standing on the top of the cliffs. Only the black cockatoos knew there was a web of men's tales concerning a dwarf blue foal — concerning this little foal that somersaulted and danced. One man had half started, in the pub, to tell a story about seeing a foal touched by St Elmo's Fire, and then he had stopped talking. Another man told of a circle of young animals watching every move as the dwarf blue foal spun his spell around them.

The black cockatoos were over Lake Albina within seconds, and they dropped to drink, as though they, too, knew in every bone and feather — right to their yellow ear coverts — that they must drink of one or other of these lakes'

magic water. For men meant trouble.

Different men told different tales, but slowly these tales were coming together. The Quiet Man was one who had been in the Jindabyne pub and heard of the blue horses at Cootapatamba. Franz, who had been caught in the blizzard, now realised that the old blue roan mare and her foal came from Quambat way.

The water of the Blue Lake was ice-cold, but its touch was thrilling. Choopa was standing knee-deep near the edge, looking up at the high cliffs, when the voices came again, and the two men walked right to the edge of the cliffs.

This time both Dandaloo and Son of Storm had been alerted by the black cockatoos, but when they looked, and listened, the two men vanished.

Just as Dandaloo had been obsessed with the longing to get Choopa to the Blue Lake, she was now determined nothing should stop them going to Albina, that beautiful double lake, before they left the high mountains for their well-known home. What could those men want? They had no dogs, no whips, no lassos.

Son of Storm, without such a strong longing for the high lakes, was uneasy, and quite suddenly he decided that they should go.

Dandaloo stood in the cliff-encircled water, watching him lead Wingilla and Bri Bri up the snowgrass slope, saw his hooves brushing the white paper daisies, knew she had to go too, taking Choopa. Choopa splashed the water over her in clouds of golden and silver spray. The men walked closer to the cliff edge, watching, till Dandaloo and Choopa began to follow the other three. Then the men started to climb up and around the cliff.

Choopa lagged behind, looking back at the beautiful lake. An unfelt wind ruffled the surface, and Choopa stood, one foreleg raised, undecided for a moment, and then suddenly trotted back to the water and plunged in, breaking the ever-widening circles. The Blue Lake was offering him something — was giving something to him.

Son of Storm had started to trot. Dandaloo, following him, looked back. There was Choopa racing out of the water, and the men were hurrying along the top of the cliffs.

There was quite a distance to go to Albina, and the climb up on to Carruther's Peak before the long, steep jog down to the double lake was tiring. Dandaloo knew the men must be a long way behind, and none of the horses really knew if they were following at all. In fact, they were on their way back to Jindabyne with more tales.

Ahead was that sparkling lake in the floor of the Canyon.

Dandaloo stopped, as though frozen. She was staring at the foot of the Northcote Pass. A man was sitting on a boulder, looking towards them.

All Choopa saw was a ruffling of the waters by the same unfelt breeze as before, and all he knew was that he must go down to this lake and plunge in, too — right into where the water was ruffled.

The shale shelf around the rim of the lake ended abruptly. Suddenly there were no stones beneath his small, hard hooves. Then he was floating — there in the rippling lake for the man to see.

That man was the man who had been lost in the storm and the fog, as he had dreamt of the 100-year-old blizzard that had nearly brought disaster to the artist, the scientist, and the horse named Tommy. Now that man, having learnt that the blue mare and foal had survived the terrible night, saw that weird foal plunge into Lake Albina, into the very centre of the ruffling where the wind had moved over the waters.

Franz, the man of the blizzard, sat quite still and watched, almost as though he expected to see an angel above the water.

Later on, Dandaloo and Son of Storm saw the man climb up on to the Northcote Pass and disappear over the other side. He did not reappear.

The day was getting late and a peacefulness had descended on the Canyon. Each one of the group of horses was tired, each one was enjoying the calm weather, the serene place, so they simply stayed, and, as night fell, they found soft hollows in which to sleep, there above the double lake.

Choopa curled up close to Dandaloo.

The man of the blizzard had not let himself be seen again, but had crept round behind rocks on Mueller's Peak, and later went silently down nearer to the lake, by starlight. He had not found his tent below Mt Etheridge, but his sleeping bag had still been there, where he had put it before the blizzard, wedged by rocks, so he spread it out by the lake and slid into it. He was fairly warm and fell into a half-sleep, waking often to make sure the brumbies were still there.

A little wind blew gently up the Canyon, just before dawn, and ruffled the waters of the lake, breaking up the reflections of the stars.

Then the blizzard man saw one of the brumbies stir and get up from its hollow. It seemed to him quite certain that it was that weird blue foal with the legs that flew out circling sideways, and who reared and danced on his hind legs. An idea and a wish that could not be denied leapt into his consciousness.

He watched the foal walk down to the lake and walk in where the wind, blowing where it listeth had stirred the water, and there, before the stony shelf ended, he rose in a rear and stood poised — silver blue, silver black, in starlight, small foal clothed in mystery.

## *A Hand Coming Out of the Mist*

Winter's great gales were coming — blizzards to blow the man-made tales away into gullies and rock caverns. Winter's white cover would soon come to the mountains, and queer tales would all be buried under the snow.

Dandaloo had ceased to feel certain that Choopa would grow. Even their visit to the high lakes had not helped him grow as much as Bri Bri had, but the dreams that Dandaloo dreamt about the gift the lakes might give her foal were like a truth, hovering.

Before the snow-laden winds came, before the frosts made the mountains so hard that the earth rang at the touch of horses' hooves, several men went out into the mountains, some to the area at the head of the Limestone Creek — the real source of the Murray River. They did not go together, and did not know anyone else had gone, for it was already getting close to dangerous weather. One man was curious to know if the foal whose ears had been momentarily touched by St Elmo's Fire was still alive. Another man — the man who had lived through that blinding blizzard — had a dream in his head, a vision of a blue foal poised in a rear, in the waters of Lake Albina. Others were drawn to go out, as though pulled by curiosity.

One of the men had been hunting brumbies during the autumn, but Dandaloo and Son of Storm and their small band had missed these hunts because they had stayed up in the high country, grazing among the rocky tors, even going down into the head of the Leatherbarrel Valley. Choopa and Bri Bri learnt the whereabouts of all the good grazing grounds — perhaps they also learnt hiding places and ways of escape.

Choopa had barely grown at all, although he was undoubtedly well muscled for a five-month-old foal. Dandaloo could see that he had learnt a lot in that lovely time in the high country — but still he was a miniature. He had tasted the silver leaves of the snow daisies, he had breathed in the scent of heath, touched with his nose and smelt the sweet fragrance of the alpine marsh marigolds that flower beneath the Cootapatamba Drift.

Dandaloo had learnt a lot, too. The main thing that she had learnt was that, though there were no cattle out in the mountains, no stockmen riding the snowleashes, there were men on foot. They did not carry lassos, but she felt that they posed some danger to Choopa.

The time came to think of going into the lower country, and Son of Storm and Dandaloo began slowly heading in the direction of Dead Horse Gap. After a few sunny days and freezing cold nights, they turned down off the tops and into that lovely snowgrass basin, below the South Ramshead, and were trotting down towards the trees, the first stunted snow gums.

Dandaloo noticed that Choopa kept looking towards the trees. Presently she felt sure she noticed some slight movement which was not just branches being stirred by the breeze. Choopa stopped, poised, listening. Suddenly he neighed and began to gallop, tossed his blotched blue and white head and his furry mane, and neighed again.

Dandaloo, catching up with him, saw a flicker of movement in those topmost snow gums. She stopped and stared. Something was hidden in the trees. She heard the pardalote's double call. That red-tipped pardalote — or its children or grandchildren who had lived there in the snow gums for years — was calling.

Choopa started to gallop as fast as he could — falling, somersaulting and leaping. Finally he stopped and reared up, then started walking on his hind legs just as shapes began to emerge from the small, gnarled trees — and some kangaroos hopped out, followed by little wallabies, one fat wombat and an echidna. A circle of young animals formed round Choopa, there on the basin below the rock peak of the South Ramshead.

Dandaloo stood on a little rocky hump and looked on uneasily. It seemed that the feeling that they were being watched was with her always, yet she had not seen anyone for some days.

What harm could men on foot do? But the old mare, looking at Choopa with deep yearning, was afraid. Somehow she was certain that he would not grow into a big, strong stallion, and certain, too, that men were interested in him for his rhythmic dancing and the spells he could weave. Then, because she longed to touch him, she walked down, off the little tree and rock-capped mound, and into Dancing Brumby the circle of young animals. She touched her nose to his, and he, in turn, reached up to his mother's gentle lips.

If anyone had been watching, they would have seen this, and seen the young animals moving round them with slow steps and graceful hops, as if each movement had special meaning.

Dandaloo rubbed her head on Choopa's neck, then she started to lead them all down through the snow gums towards Dead Horse Gap. Choopa followed his mother, his head beside her flank, and all his little troupe of young animals strung out after him through the trees and the rocks.

Dead Horse Gap is a place where rainbows arch. It is the lowest pass across the high mountains — a migratory route for birds, and where they make a short

journey between the Murray Valley and the high lands of the Monaro carrying with them all the mysteries which are part of their lives. Winds blow through Dead Horse Gap, singing the music of the spheres.

Above Dead Horse Gap, the wisest of all brumby mares, Bel Bel, gave birth to Thowra, the Silver Brumby, and years later Bel Bel came there when her time came to die, so her bones are up there, bleached by sun and wind and the marvellous snow.

The little group of brumbies, kangaroos and wallabies reached the Gap at evening — at dream time, when no cars were on the bitumen road.

There, in the centre of the clear snowgrass pass, beyond the road, Choopa and his little troupe played.

A mist crept up with the dusk from the Crackenback Valley, and all the young animals were wound around with mist, Choopa's blue and white body and the silver grey of kangaroos merging with the fog.

Mist seeped into the snow gums that grew thickly up Dead Horse Ridge. Occasional soft bars of reflected light filtered through that eerie fog and sent a soft, searching beam from the west.

Once Dandaloo wondered if she saw a man's face among the snow gum leaves, and a horse's head. It was then that Son of Storm heard the clank of a stirrup iron, and he succeeded in drawing Choopa away, out of his dream of rhythm and music.

The mist began to thicken. Choopa pressed close to his mother. This dark fog was without wind or pellets of snow, but it was as dense as that fearful cloud that had made the mountain world totally dark, up there by Lake Cootapatamba.

Choopa had been desperately afraid that night. Now, he wanted to escape this dark fog — get right away — but in no way would he leave his mother. He was making little tremulous noises and Dandaloo, realising that he was very frightened, turned her head to comfort him. She rubbed her face up and down his small, ugly head, but, just then, there was a sound quite close — a shod hoof hitting a stone, a sound that was muffled by fog, but yet unmistakable. The mist thinned around them for one drifting moment, and Dandaloo felt sure that she and Choopa must be visible, though the mist was like a grey wall in front of them, and she could not see any horse who had made that sound.

Choopa could feel her shaking and trembling, and her fear made Choopa's terror much worse. All of a sudden he felt that he must leap in the air, twist around like the willy-willies, call up all the magic that he could bring from the bush, to protect them from evil.

This time the rhythm did not protect them. No silken string came to join them to the stars.



Terror shook Choopa, from hooves to ears.

Dandaloo was shaking too. Eyes seemed to stare out of the mist all round them.

Eyes watching. Eyes ... and there was no sound. Were there really eyes? Perhaps a man had been hidden in the snow gums on Dead Horse Ridge, and had come closer in the fog, but Dandaloo was certain that there was more than one pair of eyes, more than one man. She was trembling all over. How could she protect this beloved foal of hers, this foal who had never grown. How would she protect him if a man crept up out of the fog?

Then anger began to rise up inside her. Of course she could protect him with all her strength, and as she thought of it, her trembling with fear turned to a furious shaking with anger.

She began to lead Choopa off across the hillside, through the darkness and the fog. She did not know in which direction Son of Storm had vanished. Just as she was trying to *feel* his whereabouts, his neigh rang out from further across the side of the ridge and a man loomed up in the fog, right beside Choopa.

Dandaloo's nose and teeth and shoulder crashed into a body; she pivoted around and kicked furiously with her hind legs, before the man had time to steady himself. Knowing she had knocked him down, she called Choopa, and as he heard her call, Choopa saw, Dancing Brumby through the mist, a hand grabbing at him, then he propelled himself forward in one huge leap and he and his mother galloped towards Son of Storm's call, Choopa stumbling but not falling over.

They both saw Son of Storm as they burst out of the mist into faintly starlit night.

Dandaloo seemed to fling herself towards the big brown stallion. Then she stopped and waited for Choopa, and Choopa hurried on, feeling as if the man were at his heels, feeling that Dandaloo was the most important thing in all of life and that he must reach her before the man's hand grabbed him out of the mist. Then he *did* fall. He fell in a gasping bundle beside Dandaloo.

It took a moment for him to gulp in his breath and pick himself up and, at the same time, he looked back to see if the man's hand was stretching out towards him, but all he could see was the mist and the dark of the night. There was no sound either, except the dirge of a plover, down the river.

The plover's cry evoked some deep sadness in the little foal, as though he were longing for everything which he did not have ... a noble head that was not too big for his body, perfect legs made for galloping, a smooth, blue roan hide with no strange, white blotches, a deep girth for lung power.

He was there, leaning against his mother, beside Son of Storm. Presently

they would lead him off towards the Cascades, but Dandaloo was gently nuzzling his ears as if he were the most valuable thing in the whole world.

Wingilla and Bri Bri had gone ahead, but Son of Storm had waited to help Dandaloo protect her miniature foal. Son of Storm knew that, even though Choopa had barely grown at all, in his self the little colt had developed a force — the power of the wind and the falling snow. Son of Storm had understood Dandaloo's wish to take Choopa right into the brilliant waters of those lakes.

They joined Wingilla and Bri Bri in a thick clump of trees, and went on slowly together, hoping to find the Cascade herd by morning.

As daylight came slanting through the misty bush, haloed in shining gold, as though part of a miracle there came the little tribe of bush animals — even a pair of slightly breathless wombats. Choopa was filled with joy to see them all. Life was safe. Surely his circle of animals would create a spell to frighten away any hands that came through the mist — frighten away the mist itself.

### *Young Wombats Warmed him in the Snow*

‘The mother is very old.’ A man’s voice filled the hut and was carried up the chimney with the smoke and sparks from the fire. ‘I tell you that the crippled foal will never survive the heavy winter that’s coming.’

There was a long silence while flakes of snow sizzled as they fell into the open fire and against the window. Then the man’s voice went on:

‘I’m going to try to catch that foal before the really heavy snow sets in.’

‘Why?’ Another voice broke the silence.

‘Well, why’ve *you* come out?’

‘Just because I was curious as to whether it was still surviving. It’s a game little bugger.’

‘Well if I catch it and take it home, it *will* survive.’

No words sounded for a while, nothing to cover the whisper and patter of the falling snow.

At last the quiet voice said: ‘I’d leave it with its old mother,’ and somehow the idea of the old blue roan entered the hut. The wind was rising and it cried around the slab corners, the snow gathered against the windows, and an old mare seemed to be in the shadows.

Snow stuck to the rough-barked trees in the bush, slid off the smooth-barked snow gums, slid off leaves, until so much snow had fallen that it built up on twigs and branches. In the dark, the possums, the wombats, and the dingoes and kangaroos saw the steady blanketing of the bush. All the animals and the birds knew that it was the start of a heavy winter.

Dandaloo had seen many winters, and she knew, too, that this one would bring a lot of snow. Relating everything, as she did, to how it would affect her efforts to protect Choopa, she wondered how a foal that was barely tall enough to reach up to her flank would ever struggle through deep snow.

When morning came and the snow had begun to beat on the wind, pellets stinging their hides, Dandaloo thought that perhaps she should try to take Choopa to Baringa’s secret canyon. Surely it dropped down into lower country where the snow might not get so deep. But if a lot of snow fell at Quambat Flat, it might fall deeply there, too, and anyway, was it already too late? A shiver travelled all down Dandaloo’s spine. Somehow she must protect her ‘little

lizard'. That morning, before half-light, while the snow poured down, she knew that she would have to wait till this first heavy fall thawed before she could think of trying to make for lower country. Anyway, one could get caught by that canyon of Baringa's having its escape routes blocked by deep drifts.

When there was sufficient light for the foals of the Quambat herd to see how the world had been transformed, they were uneasy and quite frightened by the white world surrounding them. Choopa and Bri Bri were the only ones of the young foals who knew what they were looking at, for they had experienced that blizzard in the high country, but they were keyed up and nervous too.

Choopa moved out from under the sheltering trees, and stood gazing. The wind was stronger at that moment, blowing a great cloud of snow, and the cloud and the wind gathered up the other foals and drove them towards Choopa. He stood paralysed. Fear engulfed him as the mob of young foals galloped straight at him, sweeping him along, the leaders beating a wide track.

For once Dandaloo had not been watching him, and as the mob — galloping hooves soundless on the snow — seemed to vanish in the white, whirling mass, she realised she had lost sight of him, and did not know where he had gone. She had no idea that he had been hurtled along by the mob, and their track was already obliterated by the huge cloud of cold, wind-blown snow.

Choopa felt his legs beginning to give way, but he made an immense effort to keep going with the others. He knew that if he tried to stop, he would be knocked over and trampled by the madly galloping foals. He could feel himself falling in his imagination, but he kept on his feet and kept moving and, because he was moving along with them, the foals seemed to part around him, pushing him but not knocking him over.

The trees through which they were going were becoming thicker so that the mob had to dodge and turn, and twist this way and that. Tree trunks loomed, branches whipped faces, eyes.

Choopa, sobbing for breath, was going far too fast to be able to control his direction. Snow beat in his eyes and into his open, gasping mouth.

He must not fall, he must not fall, he must keep going. He saw his own short, blue legs trying to stretch out in front of him, but swinging to the sides. Surely the foals would not crash into him ... but he could feel their mad fear, and in this beating snow and the roaring wind, they might do anything at all. Choopa was afraid of the wind too, but not of the snow. He was much more afraid of the wildfire terror — mob terror — burning in the foals.

Most of these foals had, at some time, formed the circle around Choopa and would not wish to hurt him, but all of them together — and mad with fear — were entirely different.

Choopa tried so hard to keep up with them, then all of a sudden his legs were giving way. He was falling, too tired to somersault. He saw a snow-dusted stone sticking up out of the white-carpeted earth that was racing up to meet his face. The stone was the last thing he remembered seeing, and he remembered fear as he knew his head was going to hit it. Actually, the last thing he felt was hooves — hard hooves galloping over his rump, his back, his shoulders, withers, neck. Perhaps he squealed with fright and pain. He did not remember. There was nothing for a while, and he was intensely alone. The snow was cold beneath him, and as it fell on to his bruised, blue hide. He tried moving, but he was too sore. His head ached and throbbed. His body ached all over.

Cold ... cold ... He was cold and very sore. After a while he slept or fainted.

Something warm and furry crept up to his face, then another nestled up to his shoulder. He forced one bruised eyelid to open, so that he could see a blurred shape. He could just see one of the young wombats. It seemed to give a deep sigh as it saw Choopa's eye open a bit wider. The wombat plodded forward to rub gently against his head, then two wombats lay together along his neck and withers, and a little warmth crept through him. Somewhere he could hear Dandaloo calling ... perhaps he imagined her call ... and the snow poured down, covering all tracks, blanketing the world, covering his body and covering the wombats.

Dandaloo's call really did sound, and he knew he must answer. The sound he managed to make was barely a sound at all, and the falling snow deadened it. Then Dandaloo's call sounded again, and this time he raised his head just enough to throw a weak neigh into the blizzard.

The wombats listened for Dandaloo's reply, then one rubbed against Choopa's face, brushing off the snow, and they both nestled into his neck.

Choopa could feel their warm bodies, and he succeeded in raising his head even more than before, to send a stronger neigh that Dandaloo could surely hear.

A branch cracked, not very far away. Choopa called again, and expected to hear his mother coming, but there was no other sound. Soft snow falling, and lying in a soft blanket all over the ground, made a quiet world except for the rush and roar of the wind.

Then all of a sudden Dandaloo was hurrying through the blizzard, floundering where snow was being blown into deep drifts, brushing snow off branches that were weighed down with it. Choopa heard her gasping for breath before he saw the beloved old blue mare. Then he saw her through the curtain of snow — really saw her, not just as the dream which he had been dreaming.

He had been so longing for her to come to find him that he succeeded in half rising up, in spite of his head spinning, and a terrible dizziness, so that he

collapsed back on to the snow.

Dandaloo saw him quite unable to get up, and made a queer sound of misery, then she sprang through the last few feet of snow that separated her from her dwarf foal. She was there, right beside him, running her nose over his head — feeling the lump on his forehead where he had hit the stone — then gently touching all his body, pushing away his covering of cold snow, and snuffling her gratitude at the wombats, too.

No sharp stab of pain went through him, as her nose travelled all over him. Dandaloo knew then, even Choopa knew, that he had no broken bones — that his inability to get up was because of his swimming head. It was quite clear that although his legs were undamaged, he could not stand up, so Dandaloo nudged the little wombats up on to his neck and withers again, and she herself lay down behind him, cradling him with her legs as she had done so often before. She would keep him warm, but instinctively she knew that he must not go into a deep sleep.

The brumby-hunters' hut was about ten miles away, and lower, where the snow had not yet fallen so thickly, and did not lie so deeply on the ground. The men had saddled up and ridden out once, but had found the going pretty heavy, so they had returned, thrown more logs on the fire, and hung the billy above the flames to make the tea.

'I'll try to catch that foal, when this storm is over,' one man's voice said. 'I tell you this will be a heavy winter and the foal may not survive.'

'Let him be with his mother,' the Quiet Man said.

The snow did not cease to fall, and when their food began to run out, the men rode out of the mountains.

The Quiet Man was worried. He kept seeing a picture in his mind of the fireball, and the tiny blue roan foal seeming to wear a cap of St Elmo's fire.

One man did not say that he was going to load up a packhorse with food and blankets and go back into the mountains.

### *Danger from the Never-Ceasing Snow*

Most of the brumbies from the Quambat Flat area kept working their way continually downwards as the snowline became lower and lower, and further south. There was still good grazing to be found in spite of the almost ceaseless snowfalls. Dandaloo and Wingilla, with their foals, roamed about together, seeking grass. One evening Son of Storm and a few more mares and foals — heralded by a big flock of currawongs — arrived to join them.

The wind was talking in the ridges above when Son of Storm and the others came trotting into the frost hollow where Dandaloo and Wingilla were grazing. There was enough grass and shrubs for all of them for a few days and the mares were pleased to have Son of Storm's company and perhaps his protection — though really there was nothing to fear in that blizzardy weather and freezing wind, except hunger. Yet Dandaloo kept feeling that she had something to fear for Choopa — some violence, not just the slow creeping death of starvation ...

They all grazed till dark that night, and then slept close together beneath sheltering, low branches of black sallees. They awoke to an entirely different world.

Slowly, softly, insistently, all through the dark night, snow had fallen in thick curtains of flakes. All the clear green hollow was covered in white snow. The grass had vanished, the shrubs were bowed down and buried.

Each one woke, got up and looked around, shaking the snow off their coats. Then Son of Storm and Dandaloo gathered the small mob together and began urging them southwards, feeling that there must be less snow lower down. The wind was crying and howling in the rocks of the higher peaks, an icy, killing wind, and the snow fell in a thicker and thicker pall.

Cloud and snow bore in on them, matted their eyelashes. Some of them tried digging for the grass that lay underneath, but Son of Storm and Dandaloo urged them on, knowing they had to get out of the snow before it became too deep, and while their hooves made a track that Choopa could follow. Dandaloo knew that brumbies had died in heavy snow years, that even foals far bigger than Choopa failed to get through it, and lay down in the soft white snow and slept ... and died.

The blizzard became denser. They could not see at all. Dandaloo grew very nervous as they went further and further on, through the unknown country which

they could not see. Even though not one landmark was visible, Dandaloo began to feel more and more strongly that she had been near this place before.

Then suddenly, even when there was no sign of stockyards, she knew they were there, to one side of the long valley down which they were ploughing their way. This was where the men had driven her, with the other brumbies, before the Quiet Man let her go. Now it was all under snow ... but she should never have come back here, and Choopa should not be here at all.

She stopped still, but Son of Storm urged her on into the swirling, stinging snow clouds. On they went in those clouds in which there was nothing — just a vast whiteness that moved with the wind. Sometimes the entire world swayed or went round, but mostly the wind was a roaring force which could grab at Choopa, knocking him over.

Choopa was afraid. He struggled up on to his feet.

Occasionally they knew, just in time, that they were going to walk into a snow-covered tree and they would change direction slightly, but always went back onto the line that should take them out of the snow — if they could keep going.

The wind veered briefly, and on that whirl of air came a terrifying smell.

Once more Dandaloo stopped absolutely still, shaking, then the smell was borne away on the wind, but just for that second it had brought to Dandaloo the memory of the rough touch of stockyard rails against her hide, the sound of voices, the burning rasp of a rope, the bite of a whip.

Suddenly there was a voice, and a dog barking — the bark coming closer, stronger, definitely telling that they were near. In the wild blizzard there was a shadow dog bounding in the snow — just a shadow, then gone. Suddenly it was more than a shadow, snapping at Choopa's heels.

A voice called. The dog barked again. Dandaloo urged Choopa to go even faster, but he was already tired from forcing his short legs onwards in the deep snow, and he could not push himself any faster.

The dog bounded again after the little foal and Choopa, having never had to fight a dog off, did not know how to, but it was instinct, when the heeler got hold of one fetlock, to kick him off with all the strength he could gather up.

Again there was a voice, again a veering wind brought the scent of wood smoke.

Dandaloo could not go for the dog herself and call Choopa away, all at the same time. She called Choopa.

It was Son of Storm who was suddenly rearing up — a massive, dark stallion towering up in the cloud and blowing snow.

Son of Storm saw the man and the dog for a brief, clouded-over second,



closer, far closer than he had expected, and he crashed his front hooves down, hitting the man a glancing blow. Then the man and the dog vanished in the wind-driven cloud and thick, white flakes.

Dandaloo heard that voice call, but she hurried Choopa along — her mind whirling with the snow. Danger was where there were men, men with their dogs, and fences, and fires, and smoke, but the snowflakes coated her and deepened the covering with every moment, and the deepest danger of all was the never-ceasing snow ... and starvation. Without grass or the bushes that bore seed pods, they would all freeze, fade to nothing and die.

Choopa must not die.

She looked back to make sure he was still able to keep walking, even though she could feel him against her flank.

Son of Storm was nudging her along and she was nudging little blue Choopa. She caught sight of the shadowy shape of Wingilla and Bri Bri, and, occasionally, other mares.

The only way in which they knew that the day was ending was when the world, instead of being densely white and grey, became black. The snow was wetter, by then, and not falling quite so heavily. They must soon find grass and some bushes that were not bowed down and covered.

Once or twice after the dog had vanished, Dandaloo felt certain they were being followed; once she had thought she heard the clink of a bridle ring in the distance.

Choopa moved slower and slower, and nothing appeared through the cloud and blowing snow behind them.

At last they reached a long ridge where the grass showed in patches, and then clear areas of grass beneath the trees appeared, and some bushes. It was time to stop forcing the foals to keep going.

So they slept. Even Dandaloo finally slept, though she stayed awake for a long time, listening and wondering, and in that dark night, the snow began to fall even more heavily; again, no one came.

The man and the dog had given up before complete darkness, and gone back to light the fire in the hut. The dog answered the faraway howl of a dingo, and the rugged-up horse neighed to brumbies out there in the night and snow.

So there was another morning of a white world, cloud and wind and blowing snow, and the grass they had grazed the night before had vanished under the white blanket.

Some of the shrubs that were sheltered by trees were not yet bowed down and covered, so there was food for the mares, but no water to drink, and they

must have water as well as food to make milk. Wingilla went searching for a stream, but when she dug in a depression in the snow, where a stream should surely run, it was frozen solid.

Mouthfuls of snow only made them more thirsty.

Son of Storm half-remembered tales of a beautifully warm valley somewhere west of south — towards the sunset. Perhaps it was only a story, perhaps they might find it, but the herd had better eat while it could, while there was food still showing above this all-pervading snow.

When they had grazed on the shrubs for some time they moved on, little Choopa struggling along the tracks made by the others, and Dandaloo keeping him close to her. Sometimes he just dropped on to the half-beaten track, and Dandaloo kept nudging him, so that he did not sleep.

Son of Storm found a creek that was deeper and not frozen right through. He broke a hole in the ice from which they could all drink.

All through that day of falling snow, they went on and on, veering slightly to the west. Dandaloo realised Choopa really could go no further, just as a reddish glow seemed to suffuse the snowflakes, yet somehow they kept struggling on, towards the sunset.

A warm fanning of air came up out of a valley. Only a little way down the bushes seemed free of snow; there were areas of grass. Dandaloo gave a deep sigh. Somehow she managed to urge her little dwarf a few feet downwards, till she found a snow-free place where he could lie. She lay down beside him, waking him whenever she knew he should have some milk, if he were to survive the onward struggle through the blizzard.

A man was riding loose-reined on his horse — riding through the snow back to Benambra. Both horse and dog knew the way through pouring snow as well, or better, than he did.

Days later, in the Golden Age pub at Omeo, he mentioned having seen a dwarf foal in the blizzard, and that he reckoned it would be dead by now.

## *The Black Mare*

In the lower country, the pod-bearing bushes were stronger and taller, and not covered over by snow. Dandaloo and Wingilla found plenty to eat, so that there was milk for their foals. Bri Bri grew a little, in spite of the hard, cold winter season. Choopa remained as small as ever, but he did not become thin and weak.

On the slopes that faced the sun, the snow was thinner and melted between falls. The bushes quickly shook themselves free. As the year turned towards spring, streams began to break free, or bubble and gurgle beneath the ice.

The foals were filled with excitement in this, the first spring since the one in which they were born. They would race over the patches of snow, rear and plunge. Other young animals came out of burrows to play. Soon they, too, were forming a circle around Choopa while he romped and danced.

The snow became crystalline, like sugar, having been melted and frozen over and over again. It was Choopa who was the first one to learn the joy of rolling in it. Down he would go, legs in the air, his whole body wriggling in the coarse, slippery snow. Then, one time, as he wriggled, he began to slide, his head pointed downhill and then he slid quite fast on his back. The first time he found himself slithering head first, he felt rather unsure as to what would happen when he reached the fringe of ice at the bottom of the drift, and the wet grass, but it was all so splendidly upside down that nothing mattered, and when he reached the grass there was no jolt and he simply swung his short, stocky legs over and leapt to his feet.

Suddenly, from somewhere high up, there was the sweet music of a western warbler. He did a few waltzing steps on his strange legs, dancing to the warbler's song as he went upwards towards the tall messmate in whose high branches the tiny bird was whistling.

Choopa had begun to lose his winter coat, and a more pronounced pattern of strange markings had appeared, particularly on his head, where one white blotch crossed over his offside eye, and seemed to have splashed down from his ear. The nearside eye had a deep blue patch above the white-encircled eye, making an enquiring expression. His belly was white and his back seemed to have blue stripes. His blue roan rump had a shining white circle right at the butt of his tail.

Dandaloo watched him going over to the source of the music, and she thought — with a great swelling pride — how lovely he was. It was only once

— that moment after he was born — that she had thought him terribly ugly.

The heat of the sun became stronger. The snow melted all through the lower country. It ran in rivulets into the sunset valley. Far above and far away, the high, snow-covered peaks glittered.

Dandaloo and Son of Storm began to feel a great restlessness and longing for the high country — the longing to be on the move. Quambat Flat, the Cascades, Dead Horse Gap, the Ramshead — all that world called them insistently. Dandaloo also felt a nagging certainty that men lived very close to this lower country. It must be time to go. The snow would be melting everywhere, leaving long roadways of grass, all the way to the Limestone, to the Cascades. They should start to graze their way to their home.

Once the idea of home, and the high mountains above it, got into their minds, the insistent longing became a clamour, and Son of Storm and Dandaloo gathered the others together, and they started off. The young wombats trundled after them for a while, but soon went home to their mothers and their warm burrows. Choopa looked back sadly at them, but ahead were all the friends who had stayed at Quambat. There were the two young wombats who had kept him warm when he fell in the snow, unconscious. They were brothers for ever. He was eagerly looking forward to finding them again.

Very soon, even though the foals had been quite well fed in the sunset valley and were strong, they began to tire, because Son of Storm, longing for home, set a faster pace than usual. Choopa was tired before the others, and after a few miles of pushing himself on and on, exhausted dreams began to take possession of him.

The snowy, shaded side of ridge and hill, the long strips of grass between snowdrifts, all began to merge into an ever-changing pattern moving hither and thither in front of his eyes. Shadows were black and deep blue, snow was glittering white, and, in his dreams, he was leaping and bounding on soft drifts of snow and he was dancing ... some steps and movements which he did not know. He was moving in time to a birdsong he had never heard, and he was dancing as though his life and Dandaloo's depended on him performing such intricate movements as he had never seen. Somehow, if his dance was perfection, he would be rewarded. A great bare hill, high, high up in the sky, such as they had seen above the beautiful mountain lakes, would be his, to give to Dandaloo so that she could graze there, all the days of her life.

And he would be tall, and strong.

The ugly dwarf foal stumbled on and on, while the strange dreams were pictures in his head. There seemed, in those dreams, to be some big stallions staring at him — horses that could hurt him. Surely it was his galloping and

falling and somersaulting that had made the stallions and mares accept him in that Quambat Flat area, when Dandaloo first took him there.

Little, exhausted, dreaming dwarf, he stumbled beyond recovery and fell, managed to tuck his head under, and half-somersault, but was too tired to get up. Dandaloo stopped immediately, stood over him till his flanks were not heaving so desperately as he gasped for breath. Presently she nudged him to get up and drink.

Son of Storm, too gentle to force them all to go on, began to graze until every foal was rested.

So the trek homewards began. They were not driven, now, by the terror of being caught in the deep snow, but drawn by the magnetism of home and the high mountains further up.

They met a few strange horses — horses who had come from places which even Dandaloo did not know. A black mare shied with fright when she saw Choopa — shied, then stood with spread legs, and stared, before she tossed her head and mane, and galloped away.

Choopa watched as she returned cautiously — ears laid back — but she went away without coming close. He suddenly felt crestfallen — hurt. None of the Quambat Flat horses had ever shied away from him in fright. He knew he was much smaller than the other foals, but nothing had ever made him feel as though he really looked queer. Was he so ridiculous? Was he so ugly that a mare would shy away from him?

He tried to draw himself up taller and taller, as that mare kept stopping and looking back at him — occasionally snorting.

Then a few other mares and yearlings that were with her began to come closer around him. One yearling even took a little nip at his rump.

Choopa squealed with anger, and Dandaloo, already angry, swung round and kicked at the yearling. Choopa, frightened and offended, rose up in a rear, dancing around in sudden anger, creating, without thinking, his only form of self-protection — his comic tricks.

As the mares and yearlings stood back, a flash of pride came to the little dwarf. He could play and dance, in a way that no one else seemed able to do, and that was what the other young animals enjoyed and that was what made them love him.

High above, a magpie sang and Choopa romped and reared. Finally he did a few galloping strides, stumbled, fell and somersaulted, then he tucked that strange blue and white head under and somersaulted again, leapt up and went round and round on one spot in the centre of the circle that the strangers had made.

Dandaloo's anger at the unkind fear and curiosity had quietened down, and she lay in the centre of the magic circle — an old mare who had seen so much, and now, because of this unusual foal she had borne, was not going to be able to live in peace.

When, at last, Choopa grew tired and lay down beside her, the mob of stranger horses melted away, leaving them both to sleep. Son of Storm, Wingilla, and the rest of the herd grazed nearby.

Dandaloo and Choopa were both half-sleeping, half-waking. The rhythm within the dance had woven a sort of calm around Dandaloo, but she knew that Choopa had been made unhappy by the black mare's behaviour.

Choopa had suddenly been forced to realise that he looked ridiculous. Aware that he was small, he was unable to see the odd markings on his head and body which, along with his unusual size, made other horses wary of him. He pushed himself closer to his mother and hid his strange blue and white head behind her shoulder. When he fell into a sound sleep, he dreamed of the soft, warm fur of the two little wombats who had kept him warm in the snow.

Dandaloo had seen the misery in his eyes, but, except to love and protect him, there was nothing she could do for him. Maybe that love would be his armour and his own sense of fun be his protection, too.

### *Choopa Dances to Music above the Snowy River*

A little stream of water ran quite close beside where Dandaloo and Choopa lay. It ran from under the fringe of a drift of snow. This rivulet of melted snow would run into the Quambat creek, and then join the Indi River, flowing on and on to the sea.

Dandaloo touched the half-sleeping Choopa with her nose.

Time flowed by in the old mare's half-sleeping mind. A picture came of that really frightening-looking bundle to which she had given birth, in the scrub and tall trees, almost a year ago, and she saw the huge stallion staring at it for a moment, almost gently, and then moving on.

That black mare shying away from Choopa reminded her of how she had been afraid of the herd's reaction to the strangeness of Choopa, and how she had not taken him to join the others for a long time, just because of this — fearing they might kill him. Half asleep, listening to the kookaburra's evening laughter, she knew that it was Choopa's somersaulting, and his joyous clowning, that had won the affection of the other horses, even of the supercilious yearlings. Choopa was nearly a yearling, himself, now.

An evening breeze began to rustle the eucalyptus leaves, to move the wattle fronds that would soon be ablaze with fluffy golden blooms.

A south wind was stirring the snow gum leaves. Images and truths floated through Dandaloo's head — pictures of Choopa performing more of his tricks within his circle of young animals, weaving a circle of enchantment. That fun, that enchantment, was quite clearly his protection against what could be mob cruelty to an odd outsider. She saw in her dreams, too, the young wombats lying on his withers, warming Choopa in the snowstorm.

She dreamt on, until a flight of crimson and blue lowries flew chattering overhead and disturbed Choopa. Dandaloo became wide awake, and knew absolutely that nothing must ruin Choopa's joy in his own ability to weave spells with his rhythm and his dancing.

The lowries had gone and Choopa slept again.

There was the faint sound of water trickling as the little stream ran from below the melting snow.

The moment came, a few days later, when they looked on to Quambat Flat from a fringe of trees at the foot of the Cobberas. Choopa saw a scattered mob of

horses grazing on the flat. Not all the ones he remembered as friends were there, and those that were, seemed ragged and thin. The mares looked poor, too, and very rough in the coat. It was Dandaloo and Son of Storm who wondered if these mares had failed to force their way into sufficiently low country to be out of the deep snow. The grass still looked brown and pressed flat from weight of snow.

Bri Bri was nervous. Choopa was really longing to play. He started to trot towards the startled herd. Dandaloo followed him. Choopa began to gallop as he got closer to the others. This time he did not fall — strange blue and white foal with legs in flying rhythm. Suddenly he realised that the mares and yearlings had gathered together.

Dandaloo, just behind him, felt her heart beginning to thump with anxiety. Were the mares and yearlings going to turn and gallop away, and make Choopa feel utterly an outsider? Or, worse still, would one of them attack and hurt him? A queer cry of fear was forced out of her, as she watched that strange-looking foal galloping towards the silent, stiff, unwelcoming mob.

If only he could realise that his only defence was the comedy which he could create, and the spell which his rhythm and dance could cast over all who watched him. Then she saw Choopa wavering in his gallop. In the last few strides before he reached the herd, Choopa simply knew that he had to somersault, as he had done before, in front of the Quambat herd. This time he had to fall on purpose, right in front of those mares and foals, and somersault, nearly to their feet. He did it! He fell and somersaulted — that odd-looking ball of blue and white — then sprang up, reared and danced. He danced about, bowing, whirling round, and then, in a way he had never done before, he swayed from side to side, walking on his hind legs, right up to the oldest of the mares, and stretched up his white-splashed nose to hers, then dropped on to all four feet and bowed.

The whole mob gathered around Choopa, and Dandaloo, with a sigh, moved forward to be part of it all. Then out of the bush trundled two wombats, wallabies, and an echidna. The day was won, and Choopa had not been ridiculed again.

A watcher from the black saltees had seen the whole unbelievable act.

Thus it was that Choopa was left in peace, to play in the spring sunshine and in the snow that still sometimes fell. Yet there was someone who had seen that strange and beautiful dance — the dance of courage and oblation.

So someone had seen St Elmo's fire momentarily touch that foal's head, like a cap and bells, the day the fireball set the bush alight. Someone had seen him like a wraith in that wild summer blizzard — blizzard and place so near to that which von Guerard had survived nearly a century before. Someone had seen that



blue and white foal standing in a rear in the wind-ruffled waters of the lovely double lake. Someone else had come out of that hut which could barely be seen in the fearful snowstorm, someone whose dog nearly caught Choopa. And all these reports of sightings seemed to add up to an ever-varying legend of a dancer, dancing to music which no one heard.

Now, spring sun was going to make the grass green and thick. The bacon-and-egg bushes would bloom with the golden and brown peas from which come the delicious seed pods. All the young animals would grow — though a dwarf might not.

Dandaloo and Son of Storm had brought their little herd safely through the winter, safely through the biggest snowstorms which either of them had ever known, stumbling and forcing their way through deep snowdrifts, and through dense-falling flakes that had turned each mare and foal into an invisible ghost. The whole world had been invisible and soundless — except for the roar, or cry of the wind at night through the granite rocks — yet they had battled through.

Dandaloo had never been so frightened in her life as she was almost that whole winter — not frightened for herself, but for her foal. Now spring was coming to the mountains, and she could relax. She had survived the heaviest winter she had ever known — and helped Choopa through it, too.

When the cattle no longer came to the snow country for summer grazing, no men rode out, either. There were no cattle to be salted, none to be checked, day after day, or brought back to their own snowlease if they had wandered. No smoke went up from the chimneys of the old slab huts. After whole summers without being disturbed at all, the brumbies grew more confident that there would be no more brumby drives. It seemed safe to go right up on to the bare ‘tops’, just as Dandaloo and Son of Storm had gone to visit the topmost lakes.

As more and more snow melted and ran away in streams to join the big rivers, both Dandaloo and Son of Storm were possessed with the longing to move on, up to the highest peaks. They had seen that men walked there, but men on foot, without whips or lassos, really could not present much danger. So, when most of the slopes of the Ramshead Range, above Dead Horse Gap, were free of snow, except in the steep gullies, they started to graze their way upward.

A fitful wind was blowing when they did the final climb up to the rocky horns of the South Ramshead. Instead of lying down to sleep in the lee of a big rock, Dandaloo began trotting along the snowgrass highways, splashing through the occasional pools that reflected the first stars as they appeared in the sky. Dandaloo looked back often to check on Choopa, but her very small yearling was coming along strongly. In fact Choopa was leaping and bounding with

excitement.

The weird night was exciting — the enormous rocks were exciting, taking on strange shapes and forms. Sometimes it seemed that great dark horses were galloping past him in the wind, threading their way through rocks — becoming rocks, themselves; or rocks becoming huge horses with flying manes and tails, then merging with the few clouds that occasionally veiled the stars. Soundless hooves galloped over stones ... starlight even shone on the wild whites of eyes — eyes that were not there ... thrilling evocations of wild horses who had once raced with the wind, and of Choopa's own excitement.

For years and years, from a time well before the last of the wide-horned cattle came, there had been a queer stone hut in the hollow below Mt Stilwell and Charlotte's Pass. Dandaloo had seen this strangely intriguing building twice, and once she had heard something.

Choopa was listening to the sound of the wind in the tors of the Ramshead Range — for wild horses are absolutely attuned to the wild mountain winds. Then it seemed that a mob of gallopers hurtled by in the blasting air, until they reached Charlotte's Pass and the wind dropped them there, among the miniature snow gums.

A faint sound came from the hollow below.

Choopa heard it. He pricked his ears. The sound grew a little louder, yet it seemed to be absolutely part of himself, in himself. He stood, so small, in front of Dandaloo and Son of Storm, trembling.

The moon had risen, huge and round, almost resting on the rocks of Mt Guthrie and the couloir of snow coming down between the main rock peak. Moonlight flooded the valleys on either side of the Pass. On one side, the Snowy River was a wide silver ribbon, on the other the creek meandered in bright loops. Mingling with the moonlight was a myriad of lights shining from the stone hut.

As the moon rose, the sound of music swelled, and lilted and throbbed through the night. Choopa felt it flow through his whole body, beating in his heart, in his legs, in his hard little feet, till he was pirouetting on a circle of snowgrass. He looked down and saw his white fetlocks all silvered by the light of the moon, and his swinging legs were moving perfectly with the swing of the music.

There he was, up with the stars and the moon. There he was in the centre of the Pass, swaying and dancing to the music of the waltz ... He saw the moonlight shining on the Snowy River and, as the music died down for a moment, he heard the song of the Snowy.

The dwarf snow gums of that high pass brushed against his flanks, as he danced to the edge of the snowgrass clearing. His mother was standing in

amongst the snow gums. He could see the moonlight making her eyes shine.

Far below, a child's voice called:

'There's a tiny horse dancing on the pass.'

The music grew louder again, and Choopa's blue and white legs and body waltzed above the Snowy River.

Then the music died down to the faintest, thrilling whisper, falling away to nothing, and only voices could be heard.

Dandaloo and Son of Storm called Choopa to follow them, and they went from the disturbing voices, away to the source of the Snowy River.

A man climbed up to the Pass, by the light of the moon, seeking the vision the child had seen. All he saw in the moonlight was a shadowy group of horses and a small foal, far along the road to the Snowy Crossing. He went back to the Chalet, certain in his mind that the foal must have played there, on the Pass, romping to the sound of the waltz.

*Hands grabbing out of dense mist ... A man and a dog appearing from a hut that was shrouded in a curtain of falling snow ... A man in a summer blizzard by the shores of Lake Cootapatamba ... A man sleeping above Lake Albina, who woke to see a blue foal rearing up, in the wind-ruffled waters of the lake.*

Dandaloo, walking along towards the Snowy Crossing, was troubled. There was a danger which she did not understand. The scent of the white-starred heath bushes rose around them in the warm night. Choopa occasionally brushed against her flank. It was as if the unknown danger was something inherent in Choopa himself, as though he created his own danger.

She, too, found that the sound rising up from the valley, sometimes blending with the song of the Snowy River, had an eerie attraction, but, for Choopa, it had obviously been totally compelling. What was in Choopa that was so different from other foals she had had? Something caused by his smallness ... perhaps a gift to compensate or to protect?

Standing in an ice-cold pool at one head of the Snowy River, Dandaloo gave a great sigh. Never before had there been a foal like him; never had she loved a foal so much.

She watched Choopa drinking that water at the very source of the great river. She had always hoped that he would suddenly start to grow, become a great blue stallion. Without even being aware, she now simply felt that he was perfect and that he possessed a mysterious strength.

The little blue dwarf pawed the water so that it spangled in the moonlight and moonlight flowed with it into the Snowy River.

### *Escape by the Wombats' Slippery Slide*

'It's *me* they're after,' Choopa thought, and his breath rasped in his throat, his heart thundered, his legs trembled as he sank into the grevillea scrub.

Presently, as there was no sound of anyone following him, he lay down. He lay still for quite a few minutes, then he realised that he could see through the thick branches, first his mother's head, and then the whole shape of her. Somehow, without his hearing her, she had got herself quite close.

The horsemen had not been trying to catch her. In fact, one of them had cut Choopa off from her and chased him. She must have watched all that from some hiding place. Now, she was looking at him intently, almost willing him to make eye contact, and then it was as though beams wove their eyes together. Imperceptibly she moved closer towards him. Not one branch, not a leaf was disturbed by her movements, and all this time her eyes held him, so that he lay quite still. Only his ears flickered as he tried to pick up any sound ... a nerve jumped in his shoulder ... a rather distant occasional crack of a twig, nothing close to him at all. Then Dandaloo was beside him, nose touching nose. She quietly nudged him to follow her.

Choopa had learnt some hard lessons that afternoon — first, when he realised that the man with the lasso was after him and him alone. He had also learnt that it was difficult, but quite possible, to move through the bush absolutely silently. It gave him a very queer feeling, to know that the man was after him — uncertainty had come into his life, as though he were walking through a sphagnum bog. There were the high peaks of the mountains, around him — durable rocks, there for ever — but he felt as if he was walking on a shivery bog, stepping on tiptoes, making himself as light as possible.

In the far distance, he heard a sound that he had never heard before. It called up no picture in his mind. Dandaloo kept urging him on until they came to a steep, dense patch of scrub into which they forced their way and then sank down to rest in the middle of it.

The strange noise came and went occasionally. Dandaloo knew what it was. She had seen the machine that made the noise, and she did not like it or the sound. She had had a bad morning, and she was really very anxious after seeing that one of the men on horseback was after Choopa, not herself at all.

She had watched a sort of cage on wheels being pulled across the flat country by a jeep. Four-wheel drives had been in the mountains before. Men got in and out of them. Dandaloo had seen these vehicles travel over even quite rough country — rather slower than a horse could gallop.

Life for an old mare had become too full of anxiety. One thing that was so queer — a worry at the back of her mind — was that she was certain there had been several men on horseback. One man and horse she had seen before. He was a quiet man who had made sure she escaped from the yards after the round-up, when she had been caught. And wasn't he the one on his horse, whom she had seen by the light of the burning forest?

Queerer still: it seemed that the Quiet Man had driven Choopa away from the other horsemen, as though he were protecting her dwarf foal. Even if one man were trying to protect him, she felt a terrible foreboding.

As for Choopa, he became aware, more and more, that he had something to fear.

It was several days before he heard that strange purring, metallic noise again. It came from a long way away, but he already associated it with danger. He saw his mother, a few yards off, raise her head, saw her ears flickering as she tried to pick up the sound. Then she began to move and her whole body told him to follow her, but he was always beside her, without being told, always trotting along with her.

He had learnt, now, to copy her silent movements, but it was quite difficult not to brush against shrubs with legs that swung out sideways, and were not easily controlled ...

Dandaloo kept them hidden in dense bush, through which they travelled steadily.

Even Dandaloo was unaware that the man and horse who she had seen before, by the light of the burning forest, were on a parallel ridge. She only knew that, as the sun got high in the sky, and slowly started to sink, a sinister warning seemed to flow through the bush.

A whipbird's repeated whip crack made sweat break behind Choopa's ears and down his back, where the sweat turned cold.

He was sure that Dandaloo was heading for some hidden valley. She was going faster. His mother must be very worried. Then he heard the purr of an engine again and crashing and banging noises. Dandaloo listened. She knew it was a sound she had heard before, of a vehicle going over a 'corduroy' crossing of a swampy place. There was a rough road running through the bush, not far from where they were, and some of the wet places had had logs placed close together to make it possible to drive a vehicle across.

And as he heard the noises, Choopa's skin began to creep.

Two men ... one did not seem to have a rope ... two men and this strange noise ... A little ground dove scuttled under fallen branches. Bright-eyed, it peered at Choopa through the dry leaves. As Choopa hurried after Dandaloo, he thought that the dove knew he was in danger. If only he were dancing inside the magic circle of his animal friends now, he would be safe, protected by some magic spell.

The trees were thinning out, or perhaps there was a cut through the trees ... a track ... a road?

Something was behind them, something hurrying towards the track ... Whatever it was, the sounds grew louder. Choopa pressed close to Dandaloo, knowing she was nervous. She edged to the left, but there was someone there, then she swung to the right, but someone was there, too.

Choopa's thoughts seemed to be twisting, turning, jolting. He pressed his head against his mother's blue flank. He was so close to her that his swinging legs could have tripped her. A horse crashed through the trees behind them, closing in on them, driving them on.

There were men on horseback ahead, sounds of branches breaking, sounds of men's voices, then the chug, chug of the vehicle mixed with all the other sounds.

The forest seemed to draw apart, and they were in an open space, a widening of a track, but this open space appeared to be full of horses and their riders.

A rope flew through the air and fell over Dandaloo's head. A man on a big horse had the end of the rope in his hand, and he pulled it tight, as Dandaloo pulled back, trying to escape, then reared and fought. Choopa, horrified, saw another man spring off his horse, grab the rope, then get a cruel grip of Dandaloo's soft nostrils, great strong fingers twisting the blue grey flesh. Choopa leapt forward, and with a prodigious jump upwards, he succeeded in fastening his teeth in the man's hand.

For one moment he swung there, hooves off the ground.

The man yelled and let go of Dandaloo's nose, trying to shake Choopa off his bleeding hand. Another man got hold of the rope. Choopa let the hand go and went for the man who now had the rope — miniature blue and white horse ablaze with anger, kicking, striking and biting ... and as quick-moving as lightning.

'Grab him!' one man shouted. 'He's a devil.'

Choopa was wildly striking at the man who held Dandaloo, and if anyone came up behind, he would kick with all his surprising strength. He knew he had to save Dandaloo, and he did not know how to do it.

Dandaloo was putting up a strong fight, but really only making the noose

tighter around her neck. Choopa was not thinking of himself as small, even though the horses at whom he struck and kicked were so much taller. He simply had to force the men to give up and let Dandaloo go.

A voice called — sounding over the noises of shouting, and over the snorting and neighing of horses. Dandaloo succeeded in turning her head towards that voice, just briefly, before sitting back on her haunches to strike at the man who held at the lasso.

Neither she nor Choopa knew the words that were shouted: ‘Let the old mare go with her foal. No good will come of being so bloody cruel.’

The man who was holding the rope with bleeding hands, was only too glad to let Dandaloo go, but Dandaloo was not going without Choopa, and Choopa was attacking every man within reach — a quicksilver dwarf, madly trying to pay back every hurt that had been done to Dandaloo. Dandaloo knew she was free, and set off, calling Choopa urgently. All she and Choopa knew was that they seemed to get a good start. They did not know that the Quiet Man stood across the track to hold the others back.

Dandaloo, exhausted though she was, stayed in the lead. Presently she slowed up a little, and began to creep around in a circle behind where the men had been. Choopa remembered that she had seemed to know where she was going, before the men found them, aiming for some secret place. Once again, he just followed.

Then he saw a part-grown wombat sitting by some thick bitter-pea bushes. He recognised the wombat as one of the members of the enchanted circle who watched him dance. He slipped past Dandaloo and went quietly up to the wombat, putting his nose down to the black-button nose in the brown face.

The wombat patted his face and gave him a tug, then led off round the bush, and through an even thicker one.

Choopa and Dandaloo followed. They came out of the bush right on the edge of a steep cliff, and at their feet was a well-worn track — or slide.

The young wombat gave a sidelong, twinkling glance at Choopa, and started down at speed. He was leaning well back and in a few seconds was sliding faster and faster. The soil already seemed to be moving around him when Choopa stepped out of the bush and over the edge of the cliff on to the top of the landslide track. He found, with a jolt of fear, that there was nothing solid under his hooves, then hooves and legs seemed to race away from him, and he was almost resting on his haunches. He heard Dandaloo give a little snort of fear, but short of throwing himself sideways and out of the gathering landslide, there was nothing he could do.

The wombat was sliding down ahead of him, quite comfortably, as though he



had done this often. Choopa could hear Dandaloo snorting behind him, and he managed to look back at her. Dandaloo being much heavier than he, would have crashed into him had she not dug her heels in deeply. This moving track was obviously well used. It must lead somewhere ... and it was a way of escape, probably used by many animals.

The slope became much gentler, and soon they were no longer sliding and could gather themselves together, and walk down into a little hollow surrounded by trees and bushes. The wombat patted Choopa on the nose again, and vanished down a large burrow.

The old blue mare and her blue dwarf foal hid themselves in the bushes and lay down, trying to get their breath, trying to still pounding hearts, trying to calm down. There was the tinkling sound of a creek flowing over stones and, presently, the song of a lyrebird.

## *A Lasso Flew Through the Dawn*

Dandaloo had taken a very careful look around before lying down and finally going to sleep. She had seen no recent sign of other horses having been in that forest-surrounded hollow. In the steep slopes that enclosed them, she only saw one small clear space, a little rocky promontory that overlooked the hollow. Certainly there was no one up there. Tired out, she settled down beside Choopa.

The moon rose some hours later. Its beams moved over the little rocky promontory, then slowly flooded the tree-encircled hollow, and Choopa woke. He was suddenly on fire with energy, blazing with relief at having got Dandaloo away from the men and their vehicle, their ropes and their cage on wheels, and he sprang up and began to whirl round and round with excitement. Dandaloo was lying there safely, half-asleep ... safe ... no rope around her neck, no hand cruelly twisting the soft flesh of her nose. All was well — at least for a while.

The silver radiance of the moon filled the hollow. Choopa's white fetlocks flashed silver, as he began to gallop with happiness and relief. Round and round he went, then he leapt in the silver air, landed, somersaulted, reared and danced, cantered, spun around.

He had not heard the rustling in the bush, but now there were wombats following him, young wallabies and kangaroos, even one echidna shuffled around, on the outside of the ring.

It was not only the moon looking down on them, that night.

When daylight began to turn the silver light to grey, and the full moon was no longer shining, but becoming white in the western sky, Dandaloo and Choopa were on a ridge above the Indi River. They both looked up just when three black cockatoos flew across the sky, as though straight into that white and secret moon. Black cockatoos getting smaller and smaller, vanishing into the mysterious, opaque moon.

A desperate restlessness seized Choopa. Those three, with the slow grace of their wing beat, could disappear into magic and mystery. *He* needed to be able to vanish, needed to be able to cast a star-inwrought cloak over Dandaloo, so that she was hidden from the eyes of men, and would never be caught again.

Something lay in the future, something disturbing, and how could he escape it — escape with Dandaloo? How could he fly to the moon at morning? How would he urge Dandaloo to go with him?

Dandaloo saw the black cockatoos getting smaller and smaller. They had not uttered one call — had given no warning of storm or blizzard, no warning of hunters with dogs and ropes. She shivered and looked around. She and Choopa were standing in dangerously open country. The black cockatoos had gone now — gone with whatever message their wings wrote on the sky.

They might have seen the men.

Dandaloo began to feel very strongly that the flight of three, straight towards the moon, was telling them to hide. She did not need to nudge Choopa. He, too, was ready to move across the ridge and go down into the densely forested gully.

Dandaloo hoped they would find Son of Storm, and that, together, they would climb the Ramshead Range and go over the top, steeply down the other side, to the headwaters of the Leatherbarrel Creek.

They would be safe there. No wheeled vehicle could go down into that steep cleft. They could stay there long enough for the men to forget their wish to catch Choopa.

If they spent a winter there, they could go down below the snowline, but in time of hard frosts, they would be able to climb up on frozen snow to take part in a miracle of the mountains, when frost-flowers bloom on the frozen pools. They might hear the ice music chiming over the snow, as the wind moves the ice-encased leaves of the snow gums, and Choopa would be able to hear that fairyland music blending in his mind with the waltz he had heard that summer's night above the Snowy River.

When the time came, Choopa was not there to hear the ice music.

Since the day Dandaloo had been caught, it did not seem safe to travel across open country in the mountains in broad daylight, so, joined by Son of Storm, Wingilla and Bri Bri, they climbed the wide open slopes by the faint light of the fading moon, and they went towards the rocky summit of that Ramshead which is south even of the South Ramshead.

Even pale moonlight can betray, and in that faint light, the horses were silhouetted for a few moments, for one man to see. He saw them on the skyline before they turned down into the Leatherbarrel Valley. This man made up his mind that he would use all his skill and all his cunning to catch the blue dwarf, the one he had seen somersaulting and dancing, and weaving spells that enfolded all the young animals, in that little round hollow in the hills.

Other men wanted to catch that blue dwarf colt — perhaps for a plaything for their children. He had a different reason, and much more determination.

He knew that the cattlemen had nearly caught Choopa not long ago. Now, since seeing the colt's amazing dancing, he knew that no one but himself must have him. Dreams flowed through the man's head, too — visions which were

part of old memories of a faraway country where magnificent white stallions danced in an indoor riding school.

That little group of horses had gone down into the deep valley. It seemed most likely that they would sometime come out over the headwall towards Cootapatamba Valley.

He must offer a big enough reward to the man with the four-wheel drive and the cage ... if they caught Choopa near Cootapatamba, he would have to be transported in that trailer.

Choopa and Bri Bri had wandered all over the steep slopes at the head of the Leatherbarrel Valley. Then one day they succeeded in scrambling up the headwall. This wall is a precipitous slope of hard rock that separates the Leatherbarrel from the creek that flows down from Lake Cootapatamba. On the top they were suddenly in the wild mysterious country above the treeline. They cantered excitedly up the Cootapatamba Valley towards the lake that lies below Kosciusko.

That man who was so determined to catch Choopa had guessed correctly that Choopa might come up over the headwall. He had already spent a few nights in the hut built near the lake by the Snowy Mountains Authority for the workers who came to gauge the water level of the lake. That was how he came to be sitting on the shores of the sun-shafted lake soon after dawn, the morning that Choopa and Bri Bri had come up out of the Leatherbarrel, and Choopa cantered through the golden paper daisies.

The man always had his lasso with him, and he was an expert with it.

When he saw Choopa at the furthest end of the lake, he lay back in the prickly candle heath and waited. Through the stiff, dark red spikes of candle heath, and its creamy flowers, he watched the blue and white minute colt cantering with flying legs. Occasionally he bucked. Then, quite close to the watching man, the strangely ugly, strangely fascinating little horse stopped on the edge of the lake.

The pewter-coloured water sparkled here and there, as though the dawn had touched it with a wand, and the little horse reared up, made a few dancing steps, and then bowed to the water.

The man rose to his feet in one astounding action, and cast the lasso. The rope flew through the air and fell, encircling the blue and white neck — grey rope settling into blue hair.

Choopa dropped to his feet and sat back, all in one action, trying to get out of the circle of rope before it tightened, but the rope tightened immediately. The little horse flung himself down and rolled, trying to rub the rope off. The rope

was just kept taut.

He tried to gallop away, dragging the man through the lake. Then suddenly there were more men running down the slope, and the awful sound of the engine and the clanking sound of the cage.

Bri Bri was galloping towards the headwall from whence they had come.

Had she attacked the man, as Dandaloo and Son of Storm would have done, instead of galloping away with fright, she might have freed Choopa, but aggression was not in her nature.

By the time Dandaloo had climbed as fast as possible up the headwall from the Leatherbarrel, and galloped into the valley, all the men and the horses were milling around, and they had managed to force Choopa into the cage.

He had been lifted in, because his refusal had been adamant, and his kicking, striking and biting was dangerous.

The men tied him to both sides of the cage so that he could not fall, and the same dark, rather small man who had caught him got into the cage, too, to steady him. Then the four-wheel drive started steeply upwards, bumping slowly over the snowgrass tussocks.

The small man — Franz, the others called him — offered Choopa a drink, but a bucket was terrifying, and he would not drink. His coat was all streaked dark with sweat. He could barely get his breath, and his heart was thundering.

The man, Franz, tried to stroke him behind the ears. He said something in a strange accent, and his voice was kind, and rather sad: ‘Armi pferdl. Ah, he weeps.’

They bumped and crashed upwards, the horses and riders going slowly up beside the cage, till they reached that road along which Choopa and Dandaloo, with Son of Storm, had trotted in that summer evening with the sound of the music still in their ears.

Dandaloo had come up behind them, though no one had noticed. Now the car was on the road and could go faster, and she just stood watching. She could not possibly keep up. She stood, head drooping, flanks heaving, totally exhausted.

Somehow Choopa knew she was there and he felt a terrible grief. Then he called and called. Her answers became ever fainter in the distance, as she stood with a breaking heart on that high, lonely road.

## *Waltzing Among the Camels*

Their journey was long, and Choopa's fears grew with every mile, every bump on the rough road. He tried desperately to get free, when they stopped to take him from the cage and put him into a real horse float. He fought furiously, but his wild efforts were useless. He called and called, then, but there was no answer. In his heart he knew that no one would hear, because he had already been taken too far from his beloved mountains, and from Dandaloo and Son of Storm; a long way from where he had last seen Dandaloo on the mountain road, her head drooping with misery.

Franz offered him water again, risking his hand getting badly bitten as he dipped it into the bucket and then put his dripping fingers between Choopa's soft lips. Over and over again Choopa felt the longed-for water on his poor dry lips and tongue. At last he sucked the fingers, and Franz dipped them into the bucket again. Finally Franz cupped both hands together, filled them with water and held them up to Choopa. So Choopa got some water, and once he had started to drink he could not stop.

A vision came into his mind and it was as though he could see Lake Albina — the marvellous double lake. He saw it with the waters being ruffled by a dawn wind, and Dandaloo was sleeping on the shore.

'Ah, Pferd! Little horse,' Franz whispered, as the vision seemed to glide over Choopa's face.

The journey became longer and longer, and faster now there was a proper horse float. Choopa knew they were getting further from Dandaloo, and from his high mountains. They were now a long, long way from Quambat Flat and all the little animals for whom he danced and played.

At last the car and the horse float stopped moving. Franz opened the door behind Choopa. A frightening mixture of many animal smells — strong and pungent — filled the air.

Choopa began to tremble.

Then somewhere quite close, a horse neighed; there was a strange grumbling noise, and the sound of many animals moving around, breathing, eating, coughing.

Choopa snorted with fear.

He refused to back out of the float, refused to move at all. He planted his feet wide apart and kept on snorting desperately. Then he lay down and stiffened every muscle. It would be better to be dead, dead high up on a mountain side, and he suddenly thought he smelt the scent of mountain heath at evening.

A voice said: 'For God's sake, Franz, why worry with anything as ugly as that?'

Franz just laughed, but he would not let any of the other men try to force Choopa out of the float. In the end, Choopa could not remember how he came to be lying on a pile of sweet-scented lucerne hay in a small yard. A big white horse stood quite close.

He still had the lasso around his neck.

Choopa closed his eyes in the utmost misery.

The big white horse walked over slowly and put his head down to have a closer look at the strange blue and white bundle lying there trembling in the hay.

Choopa jumped with fright when some white whiskers touched his nose. He opened his eyes to find himself looking into kind eyes that could have been those of Son of Storm. He did not know what to do, so he shut his eyes again and there was the picture of Dandaloo, with drooping head, standing on the road above Cootapatamba.

The big white horse did not move, just stood munching hay.

Choopa screwed up his eyes tight as if to hold a picture in his mind, of a marvellous time and a lovely world that had once been his. Choopa half-dreamt, half-imagined, that he was somersaulting in the centre of a ring of young animals, and the little animals were weaving a spell in which the stars flowed down among them, touching them all with shining light, so that it seemed that they were part of the sky. Clothed in stargleam, they would be invincible. No man could catch and keep them. Their's was the kingdom ...

In some distant place he could hear a voice — the same voice that had coaxed him to drink, and called him Pferdl, but he was determined not to wake and find himself far from the star-bright circle.

'The voice' had come into the yard, but it was better to stay quiet, with his eyes shut tight.

Darkness closed in and Franz was there still, in the yard, and he had tied the big white horse to the fence. He was doing something to his coat. Presently, Choopa could see through the hay in which he had buried his head that the big horse's coat was shining, and every hair in his mane and tail was separate and gleaming. It was quite obvious that the big horse was pleased, and proud of himself. He pranced and held his neck arched as Franz led him out.

Choopa was alone in the yard — and lonely. He closed his eyes again and

was invaded by pictures of the mountains, and of Dandaloo — Dandaloo always looking desolate.

Then a sound came softly.

It was as though Choopa was no longer half-buried in hay, but standing in starlight on Charlotte's Pass, and a miracle taking possession of the night as music came drifting up — a waltz to which he would dance.

Now he felt the music in veins and bones, but he just buried himself deeper into the hay.

He was asleep when Franz brought the big white horse back.

After two days, it was time for the circus to move on to another town. It was quite clear that the move of the whole circus would frighten Choopa, so Franz had arranged that Choopa and his white companion in the yard should share the horse float, and leave long after the rest of the animals.

The bustle and clatter of getting all the cages hooked up, the noise and effort of loading the elephants onto trucks, and of leading the grumbling camels away — everything was frightening. There were dogs barking and some very big cats snarling. Choopa shivered and sweated. He actually saw the enormous elephants, one on the tray of each truck.

It was not a surprise to learn that each and every animal was captive. But, for Choopa, there was one nice thing about this circus — the distant music that played at night in every town in which they stopped and set up the huge tent. There was also the carrot which Franz gave him each time he had put Choopa's bridle on and led him around the yard — the carrot and the gentle rubbing behind the ears.

Sometimes Choopa called and called, but there was never an answer.

Then one night in a new town, Franz led him with the big white horse into the huge tent and held him to one side of a ring where various animals were doing their tricks. He reared and plunged with fright, but Franz held him firmly. He saw a girl leap on the big white horse and ride around, then stand up on his back.

The music was playing all the time, but almost too softly to be heard. Then he smelt the camels — a smell that had been so frightening at first — and realised that they were about to go into the ring. The music grew louder and Choopa heard that lovely, swaying waltz that had come up from the valley below Charlotte's Pass. Out there, in the ring, the camels began to waltz. Heedless of anyone, Choopa took a few steps forward, the rope of his halter sliding through Franz's hands and, with his strange forelegs swinging, Choopa waltzed out behind the camels. He did not realise that all noise had stopped, no children



laughed or called out. He was entirely absorbed in the music and the dance, blue and white dwarf waltzing his way between the great tall camels, moving with a grace that gave him beauty.

Choopa felt that he was fading into the air that surrounded him — becoming part of the music, part of the song of the Snowy River that had joined with the music, too, on that summer night.

The sawdust on the floor of the ring was soft beneath his hard little hooves. The soft feet of the camels only whispered as they, too, waltzed. They looked as if they were in a dream, as Choopa threaded his way through them.

Choopa rose up on his strong hind legs and made his little bow to a dream — then did some steps, still in perfect time. A long, drawn-out sigh sounded from all the people sitting watching in the tent. Somewhere in the front row, a man was sitting, his face cupped in his hands, intently watching little blue Choopa.

Then the music stopped. The camels, still waltzing, moved towards the opening in the ring.

Franz went out — not hurrying, not doing anything to frighten Choopa — a carrot in his hand.

Choopa was standing quite still, looking lost. He had suddenly dropped back into a reality which was deeply sad. He lifted his head and neighed desperately to the far away wild country.

Franz started to hurry then with his carrots. Choopa barely saw him. His body was still full of the rhythm of the waltz. His whole self seemed to be on that crescent pass above the Snowy River.

Before Franz had hold of the rope, Choopa took one wild look around, and knew there was no way of escape.

They followed the camels out of the ring, and there stood the big white horse waiting for them, with a young boy leading him. Choopa found himself walking close beside the white flanks as though they were those of Son of Storm.

Franz had carrots in his pocket, but even the carrots, even his growing affection for the big white horse, could not quieten Choopa's trembling when they were in the yard.

A man was talking to Franz, outside the fence.

'Well, Franz,' he said. 'Your little dwarf was wonderful.'

'Maybe he'll learn to do a levade or capriole like my beautiful white horses in the Hofburg,' Franz said.

'Do you know how to teach him?'

'I know that a young horse has to have absolute trust and affection for its trainer,' Franz answered. 'I've not had him very long.' Then his voice dropped: 'Trust and love,' he whispered, as he walked into the yard, holding out some

carrot to Choopa and some to the big white horse. Still whispering, he added, 'and my Pferdl was born in the wild mountains, of a wild blue mare ...'

There was Choopa, who had been born in the whispering forests of the snow country, and who had received a baptism in the high mountain lakes.

## *Spangled Legs*

Every night Choopa dreamed the same dream. In it, he was galloping down a steep snowgrass slope, answering Dandaloo's call. Where he stopped beside her, some little five-petalled, creamy, waxen stars were flowering out of cushions of brilliant green leaves in a trickle of water below a snowdrift. Each night, in the dream, he rubbed his head against Dandaloo's outstretched nose, and then put his own nose down to the waxen stars and a marvellous scent rose around him.

The dream was for the night. By day he was still a prisoner, being taught to trot and canter round the yard on a long lunging rein. Sometimes, feeling desperate, he would stop, refuse to move and stand, legs planted and neigh, calling his misery to the empty sky. Then Franz would indicate that he must trot on and when he obeyed, Franz would praise him and give him some carrot, rub behind his ears and soothe him, until the dreams of rolling snowgrass hills faded.

Once Choopa fell over his flying forelegs and immediately somersaulted to his feet. Franz was there beside him in a second, offering him a carrot. Choopa learnt that it was not only young animals and other horses that enjoyed his somersaulting tricks. He somersaulted once on purpose, and got another carrot — he was certain, then, that Franz appreciated his cleverness.

Choopa soon learnt that Ludwig, the big white horse whom Franz called Ludo, loved Franz dearly, and he was amused — and pleased — when Ludo came shyly over to share the carrots. Ludo was a nice friendly animal and they shared the lucerne hay which Franz brought them. After a while they started lying down close together to sleep.

In every evening performance, Choopa was let into the ring soon after the camels. The camels loved to dance to music. They took no notice of the little dwarf who danced in amongst them, and Choopa took no notice of them.

After a few times of seeing Franz standing with Ludwig near the entrance, by the brightly coloured ropes that fenced the ring, and then Franz walking out to take hold of his headstall when the music was finished and give him some carrot, Choopa would start towards them, waltz up to them and then walk the last few yards on his hind legs. The clapping of the crowds of people in the 'Big Top' did not worry him. He simply bowed to Franz, touched noses with Ludo as they shared carrot, and let himself be led out.

Once he looked up at the crowd, and he really did not see them because the

last dying notes of the music seemed to fade into the sound of the Snowy River running over granite rocks. Then, just for a moment, he did focus on a face looking at him from a front row, but his vision changed to a picture of Lake Albina, diamond blue, and he felt himself galloping down a snowgrass slope, as in his dreams, but then he plunged into the ice-cold water.

It was as though he felt the bite of the cold water around those short legs, and then his heart started thumping. There was Franz's hand on his neck. It was all a dream. He was not in the mountains, standing in water that had once fallen as great, star-shaped snowflakes — snow clothing the mountains in white.

Choopa's dreams might fade with daylight, but they were always there, at the back of his mind.

Each time the great tent with its red and white striped roof was taken down, and all the animals put in their cages and trucks, he became so restless that he could not do his tricks, but gradually even that restlessness quietened.

Franz petted the two horses — the dwarf and the tall white one — more and more, as though he knew that something within Choopa was almost breaking and the only way to save a breaking heart was with love.

Choopa was learning the capriole, the wonderful leap through the air — forelegs bent under the chest and hind legs extended — an act of marvellous grace when executed by a perfect white Lipizzaner stallion, in the riding school of the Hofburg. When the ugly little dwarf sprang, stretched out horizontal to the ground, the message was something other — it was a desperate, airborne leap towards a wild and lovely land. The longing of the little horse was surely visible for those who had the eyes to see.

It was only when he was waltzing that Choopa could give himself over completely to the swaying music and, at the same time, hear that other music of his dreams. He imagined that it was on the shores of Lake Albina where he danced, or on the high ridge above the Blue Lake with wind-driven clouds sometimes folding around him. Sometimes it was that crescent pass above the Snowy River and there was the drifting music from below, and the song of the Snowy River rising to the sky.

One night he had walked and leapt and danced on his hind legs so beautifully that there had been no laughter at the sight of the queer little blue and white dwarf, only clapping. Once more, Franz, giving carrots and praise, had fixed glittering tinsel above the small hooves for another performance, and Choopa could see his own flying legs shining in the myriad of lights. He had no idea how exciting and marvellous it looked to all the children who were watching. To him, it might be spray from a freezing mountain lake.

In the front row, that face watched him once more.

They were on the move again, next morning. While all the packing up and fastening of cages was going on, Choopa could hear Franz and the circus owner talking, but did not know what it all meant except that he knew Franz was anxious.

‘Not next stopping place,’ the owner was saying, ‘but the one after that ... special request ... it’ll be all right.’

Then Franz said: ‘I tell you, there were others after him, not only me.’

‘Don’t worry, we’ll make sure it is okay.’

On and on, the circus rumbled, from town to town, and summer was rolling towards winter when the ice trees would play their wind-chime music and old dreams would sing in the streams beneath the snow.

Choopa could not lay still. Surely he must dance upon the mountains like a flame.

It was a longer journey than usual. When at last they stopped, Choopa followed Ludo out of the float and into their yard. There was the same fence set up as usual, and the heap of lucerne hay that Franz always put for them. He and Ludo walked stiffly towards it and began to eat.

There was something different — Ludo did not seem to notice it. Perhaps it was the unusually cold air. Presently they lay down together and went to sleep. Ludo did notice that his miniature friend was restless all night long.

In the morning when Franz came to lunge him, Choopa felt too tired to move. Perhaps he had been galloping all night long — not only dreaming it. Just when Franz led him forward to practise the capriole and persuade his tired forelegs to bend up under his chest and his hind legs to stretch out towards heaven and earth, three black cockatoos flew with their slow wing-beat, right across the circus, there on the fringe of the town.

Choopa stopped still, remembering the three black cockatoos that flew towards the white disc of the old moon, promising him something. Then he took a few cantering steps and leapt, horizontally above the ground, stretching out towards a blue line of hills.

Franz rewarded his beautiful act, and bent down to put his arms around the little blue and white neck, as though he, Franz, were in his long ago boyhood in Vienna, hugging one of the great Lipizzaner stallions.

That night, as Franz and Ludo stood with Choopa, waiting for the music to begin playing the waltz that Choopa found irresistible, Choopa saw, out of the rows of children’s faces, a man’s face which he seemed to have seen before, then it was lost in the movement of the audience finding seats.

Franz fixed tinsel round Choopa’s pasterns, just above the hooves. The music started. This time the lights went out in the tent, except there were spotlights,

illuminating Choopa and letting the camels move like half-seen ghosts. Choopa danced, barely aware that he was in a circle of light, surrounded by darkness, each foreleg making a glittering, shimmering movement, as though borrowing light and time from stars' intricate patterns. It meant nothing to Choopa that his feet were making these shining patterns. He was dreaming of a circle of young animals whom he wanted to entertain, so he somersaulted and executed caprioles.

There was a hushed silence for a moment, beneath the Big Top, and Franz began leading his two horses out before the roars of applause could frighten Choopa. Then he gave them carrots as they walked towards their yard and their bran mash.

In the dark of the night a man came creeping — a quiet man with a memory of a cap and bells of fire, and a vision of a minute blue horse dancing in Lake Albina. His fingers had no trouble in unlocking the bolts that held the yard gate securely.

Was it a neigh coming from far, far away that Choopa heard? Surely he was not just imagining Dandaloo's neigh?

Choopa stepped out of the yard and walked quietly through the cages and trucks. Not one animal stirred, not even a chattering monkey gave him away. Then he was out in a big paddock, some distance from the lights of the town, and that far away neigh was insistently calling.

How would he know where to go, except where the night breeze blew him? Would he just follow the call of the hills, and would that neigh keep calling him?

The Quiet Man had been sure that the little blue dwarf would find his own way — hide himself by day, travel at night.

## *Blue Brumby, a Classic Statue Against the Dark Australian Bush*

Choopa saw his own faint, diminutive moon-shadow, as he trotted on through the cold, crisp night. He knew exactly which way to go. The mountains called him and the call echoed through every part of him, flesh and blood and bones, and perhaps it was to his spirit that Dandaloo's barely heard neigh called and called.

As the sky began to go grey with the first light, he searched for a good hiding place in thick forest, and there he crept under a big fallen branch and some bushes and hid till the day was past. It was three black cockatoos which showed him a hidden track to water, when he grew unbearably thirsty before nightfall.

Strange little dwarf horse, loving his mountain land with every part of his trembling body. Some inner compass told him where to go and where to hide — *how*, in fact, to make his way towards the high mountains, towards those lakes.

The Quiet Man, who had undone the bolts of his yard, had quite certainly known that nothing — neither man nor dog — would prevent him from getting home.

Franz, too, when he found the bolts undone, had known that his little horse — his Pferdl — would unerringly find his way home. In fact, Franz, so afraid that Choopa's spirit might be broken by his grief and his longing, had almost wondered if he had undone the bolts himself, in his sleep. How stupid it had been to bring Choopa to this town in the foothills of the mountains, to make his longing unbearable.

Choopa went on through the bush, moving quietly, listening for any sound of danger, finding the shrubs which Dandaloo had taught him to eat, drinking at the fresh, cold streams. At last he came to grassy, bare hills, and the grass was springy snowgrass. Far away, he heard that neigh again — Dandaloo calling her dwarf son back to the mountains that were his heritage.

On and on he went till, at evening, he came to a great river, ice cold and swift. He put his nose in to drink, and the song that river sang was the one he loved. He walked into the current, felt its pull on his legs, then he sank his nose in further. Deep did he drink at the Snowy River.

He found a wide, shallow place where the water rippled over small stones, and where he could cross quite easily, watched only by the glittering stars. He

splashed his way through the river and up the gentle, sandy bank into his beloved mountains. So good did it seem to be in his own world, that he suddenly did a dancing courbette, putting his weight on his lowered haunches, as Franz had taught him.

Far away there came that neigh again, and he would have answered it, but he knew he must preserve himself from danger till he got further and further from the world of men. Another night's journeying and by then he might find Dandaloo ...

He dropped to his forefeet after a few more dancing steps and realised a small possum was watching him, and he felt a longing for all those young animals who were his friends, near Quambat Flat, and wondered if they would be there to greet him.

Would he ever be safe there again? But it was the high country around the lakes about which he kept dreaming. Surely it was there from whence came Dandaloo's call.

He slept during the next day, in a round grove of snow gums, and hidden by heath bushes. A rat came and looked at him, seeming to be unable to decide what this very small blue and white animal was. A dingo bitch with two pups came walking by at nightfall. The pups pulled at his mane and tail.

Choopa shook them off playfully, and did a somersault to please them and also as a celebration, because he was so nearly at his journey's end.

The bitch and her pups followed him while he climbed a steep snowgrass slope. The moon rose high above as he neared the top of the hill.

Engraved on Choopa's mind was an ever-repeated dream which was always evoked when that distant neigh of Dandaloo's seemed to sound. In this dream he saw Dandaloo, her head bowed with grief, standing on top of a bare mountain, calling him. Then, in some way, she seemed to fade and become part of the mountains — blue roan mare becoming granite rock and snowgrass, even sometimes becoming the blue of the Blue Lake. Somehow she became all of the mountain country which his love encompassed — all that had created him. But now, Dandaloo's misery seemed to vanish, in his vision, and she became an image of joy.

So he climbed on, up the mountain, leaping and bounding.

She was not there, on that next hill top, but still her call sounded, even more real. He knew he would find her. And Choopa did another courbette for joy, on a snowgrass knoll, high above the Snowy River.

There he danced, as the moonlight flooded the mountains, imagining music, sometimes waltzing on the snowgrass — strange little wraith with moonlight shining on his white patches and the night darkening his blue, the star-filled sky



making him so small, moonlight giving a strange beauty to his flying legs and rather too big head.

So the dwarf horse, whom other horses often thought was so ugly, danced as a gift to an old blue mare, whom he knew was somewhere just ahead, and to the mountains of which they were both a part.

Onward and upward Choopa climbed — to the great, high, domed summit of Mt Twynam. Suddenly, he knew that Dandaloo was close and there, on the very top, he did a magnificent flying capriole just as Dandaloo appeared looking as though formed of starglow and night sky.

She gave a neigh of joy, and Choopa dropped on to his four feet beside her, nose touching nose, the old blue mare and the foal that had once seemed ugly. Round and round each other they romped, rubbed their heads together and romped, and then they galloped and bucked their way down Evidence Valley, right on to the ridge that makes one arm stretching along beside the Blue Lake.

What was it that created the moonlit splashing in the Blue Lake at midnight? Did an owl see the blue roan mare? Did a burramys possum see the dwarf brumby galloping to join his mother, somersaulting down the ridge where the golden everlastings flowered? Who but the stars and the moon had seen them plunging together into that great, deep lake which once had been filled with solid ice.

Birds and giant gliders must have taken the news through the bush; the news that Choopa, the jester, was free, out in the bush again, out in the mountains.

Blue Lake, Lake Albina, the Ramshead Range and Dead Horse Gap, where once a man's hands had reached out of the mist trying to catch and to hold, yet also where the dance and the circle of young animals had cast a spell, in all these places something — trees, water or wind — seemed to whisper of the magic dancer.

It was Dandaloo who was kept wondering what the future held. She looked forward to finding Son of Storm, who was so calm and brave. Choopa, leading Dandaloo, simply went on travelling by night as though man was his only danger. He just had a tremendous urge to go back, perhaps just for once, to Quambat Flat — to see all the young animals that were in his circle and then ... then what? The high country, the canyons, the tumbling streams, the lakes?

At sunset, in the spring, up in the high mountains there would be the scent of the mountain ash trees, rising up in the gullies; and in bad weather the black cockatoos would scream. Dandaloo would be with him, and for her he would dance on a bare mountain top — for Dandaloo, the moon and the stars.

On they went through star-bright nights, brushing through the last flowering of white heath. Once at sunrise they walked down a field of golden everlastings

where a host of golden butterflies rose like a cloud. They flew up all around Choopa and he reared up and played among them. There was no one except Dandaloo to see the loved and famous circus dwarf aglow with golden butterflies, more lovely than any tinsel.

There were brumbies in the Cascades, but all of them were grazing at the topmost end of the valley. Dandaloo and Choopa cut across the lower end, just before sunrise, and found a good hiding place among the huge mountain ash above the Murray River, and there they slept for the daylight hours, grazing occasionally on the shrubs that grew around the massive tree trunks.

They were not very far from Quambat Flat. They would pass the head of the Ingegoodbee River, skirting the old tin mine huts and yards. No smoke went up from the chimneys; there were no hobbled horses in the paddock.

Choopa knew that the colts who had been born earlier in the same spring as he would have grown on the summer's sweet, green grass, and the leaves and seed pods of the bushes.

Even with Franz's carrots and bran mash rewards, and lucerne hay, he had barely grown at all. All the training in the beautiful dancing of the white horses of Vienna which Franz had given him had made him stronger and far more supple; quicker on those strange flying legs that had glittered with tinsel.

Here his legs would shine in moonlight, but the dark of the moon had dimmed the night's brilliance. It was now, without moonlight, that Choopa and Dandaloo must go to Quambat Flat.

When they got there and searched the length and breadth of it in darkness, there was not a brumby to be found.

Wondering where all the horses had gone, Choopa went up to the top of the clear country again, just to make sure that no horses were hiding on the edge of the forest. No one was there and he started to canter back.

He stumbled and fell, somersaulted and was back onto his feet again, but he stood still because he heard a rustling, and he felt movement. Then suddenly there was a thunder of hoof beats. A big, strong colt stood in front of him, ready to strike. And then out of the bush there came — scuttling, hopping, leaping, hurrying — *his* friends, with whom he had created his spell from the time he found he could somersault and dance. They rushed up to him now, touching his nose with their noses, or patting him with soft kangaroo and wallaby paws, pushing the aggressive colt away.

Choopa began to spring about with joy. The animals seemed to clear a space around him ... and then, as though Franz were there, indicating exactly what he was to do, Choopa leapt into a magnificent capriole there under a darkening night sky on Quambat Flat, with the first stirrings of leaves in a wind making the

music for his 'airs above the ground'. Here there was no fabulous riding school in the Habsburg palace, the Lipizzaner white horses were only there in a dream. Here, only Choopa, the dwarf, almost forgetting his circle of friends, dancing his 'airs above the ground' for love, and a gift to the high mountains up above.

Dawn was breaking. Choopa and Dandaloo must not be out in the open in broad daylight for all to see. Even if only Dandaloo were seen by men, now, it would be realised that Choopa was not far away.

Clouds had drifted over the stars in the last part of the night, and the cold was leaden: the sharp bite of frost had gone.

Shadows of big horses seemed to glide through the trees all around the flat, but their footfalls made no sound. There, too, apart from all the shadow horses, were the two silver stallions, kings of Quambat Flat, to greet Choopa and Dandaloo.

Dawn came in showing dark and lowering clouds. It was time to find somewhere to hide.

The first snow of winter came with break of day, falling in great, cupped flakes, like the petals of the windflower anemone that grows beside the summer drifts. It was just a light fall, to coat leaves and tree trunks, to linger on grass stems. It began to melt during the day and then the night brought a hard frost, giving every leaf a globule of ice.

It was cold for the man who was camping away from a hut. He had a fire, and the flickering light from his fire made the ice on the leaves glitter and gleam. Before he got into his sleeping bag, he put a few little heaps of carrots around about. He had no lasso, no halter, nothing with which to catch a brumby, nor did he intend to do so, because a man who loves a wild horse that he is training knows when the spirit within that horse has almost reached breaking point, and he would never wish to break its spirit.

Sometime, in that night's wandering, Choopa and Dandaloo got the scent of a dying fire. Curiosity kept nagging at Choopa, and he traced the scent of the fire till he found the first small pile of carrots.

He gave a queer little sigh, and ate them.

He looked at the shape in the sleeping bag. There was another heap of carrots. Choopa, with profound trust, sniffed closer, finally sniffed near the sleeper's face. There were carrots quite close. Franz's eyes opened as Choopa's whiskers lightly moved over his cheeks, over his lips. Slowly Franz's hand moved up to stroke behind Choopa's ears. Choopa snuffled his face once more, staying while the hand stroked, then he ate the carrots before moving, without a sound, down to the last heap of carrots by Franz's feet. He ate them and then rose in a perfect courbette, illumined by the frosty stars, saluting the man.

Choopa dropped onto his forefeet and bowed, rose once more like a classic statue against the dark Australian bush. Then he faded backwards, into the forest.

A faint stir of air moved the trees, and the ice music rang.

## **Brumbies *of the* Night**

## **Dedication**

*To Dougal, with love.*

## *Foal of the Flood*

Rain pelting down: water running everywhere: raging river, water racing over its banks, far and wide.

The pale grey mare pushed her nose at the black foal that lay half on the sand, half in the water. She knew that the foal was dead. She had hoped it would struggle to its feet in this sandy bay, where the current that had swept them away had dropped them both, but it was dead. Somehow she could not leave it. It must already have drowned before they were washed together into this sandy bay. She gave it a more gentle touch with her nose, and, as she lowered her head to the cold body, she heard a cry, as though borne on the racing, roaring water.

It was the desperate cry of a foal. She touched her own foal. Really, it was dead ... dead, but ... there was that cry ... much closer. Listening for it again, she stepped into the rushing water, the swift current tugging at her fiercely. A branch hurtled towards her and entangled with her legs. The water was rising very fast.

There was the cry again.

Then she saw it: its head up in a desperate neigh that was half-muffled by water, a weakly-struggling and exhausted foal.

The foal was borne towards her, as the branch had been, and it hit her legs. Grabbing a mouthful of its mane, she took a step backwards, trying to dislodge the foal, whose legs were on both sides of one of her legs. The flood was getting stronger every second. She plunged, and got off-balance. The foal was tugged away, rolled over by the water. She sprang after it and took grip of it again.

They were being forced into the mainstream. The foal had felt that help had come; now he was seized with terror and had no strength left for struggling.

Suddenly desperate to get it to the bank, as though it were her own foal, Coolawyn forced herself to step back again and again, another step and another. Soon they should back right out of the force of the current, soon they must be in that swirl of water that would take them into the little sandy bay. Coolawyn's grip on the foal's mane was so strong that she had its head well above water. Surely this foal was not drowned.

Then she felt shifting sands beneath her hooves. She braced herself against the force of the water; gasping for breath, she dragged the foal to the bank. His hooves touched the sand and he was trying to walk. She pulled him right out of

the water before she let go her grip of his mane.

Because her own foal had been dead for some time, her udder was bursting with milk. This foal was shaking and shivering convulsively. She pushed him towards her bulging teats. As he stumbled and put his lips up, the milk sprayed over his nose. The shaking, trembling foal began to suck.

Coolawyn, the pale grey mare, could just see her own, dead, foal. The water seemed to be rising up its body. This one which the god of the river had given her was about the same age, and he did look unusual, but as she felt him sucking more strongly, the aching misery for the dead foal suddenly became a fierce love for this one that the flooded river had given to her. She licked his back and he turned his milky head to her lips. He was no longer shivering so fiercely. Soon he would lie down to sleep, and she would lie beside him, curl herself around him, press her warm body against him, love him and warm him entirely. Before the river rose further, they must get a little higher, and then, when the foal had had a good sleep, they must leave this place for ever.

She could see that the river kept rising. Snow melt was swelling every stream that headed in the higher country. The water was lapping higher and higher up the sandy bay, touching her dead foal, moving it as though it were alive, and then, as the sand gave way beneath it, the foal's body was swept away. The mare gave a strange little cry. The black foal vanished from sight in the seething, brown waters, but the flood had given her this very small, white foal. Now she must make it follow her to higher ground.

The rain stopped, but the snow melt kept the river rising and rising.

It was when the sun came out that Coolawyn saw that it was the foal's eyes that made him look unusual. His eyes were a strange colour, like the red marks on the candlebark trees. Also, he was white, and no foals were born white. Anyway, he was beautiful, and he was hers ... given for ever by the river ... Yarralala, the foal of the flood.

The sun did not shine for more than a few hours and then the rain started again, and the sound of the river could be heard, louder and louder. Coolawyn was frightened by it, and for all the rest of her life the roar of flood would fill her with unreasoning fear.

A great quantity of snow had fallen in the high mountains throughout the winter. It only needed the hot wind that had been blowing and then this rain that was falling again, to make the snow reef off.

Coolawyn knew she must go upwards to higher ground.

The roar of the river was getting louder all the time — that sound that so filled her with fear. The flood foal kept listening and trembling.



Coolawyn began to climb steeply upward through thick bush. She was surprised how well the foal followed. They would need water to drink, and grass, or rich seedpods, and leaves of bushes to eat ... she *must find* food and drink. She was wondering, too, about the rest of her herd. If they had not been swept away by the flood, they would be on the other side of the river, where they were grazing when the flood caught them.

The day grew darker. Everything was like a bad dream. Coolawyn looked at Yarralala. He was white like the foam on the surface of the flood.

What had happened to the herd? Where were they?

She and the foal might be safe, but she would still have to take care not to be caught between two flooded creeks. It was on this side of the river that the biggest snow-fed streams flowed down off the very high mountains.

Often she looked at the little white foal. He was like a ghost. He was, indeed, beautiful.

They came to a flattening of the ridge up which they were climbing. To one side there was a deep hollow. That hollow might be warm and sheltered. It was surrounded by big trees, and shrubs were thick around their roots. With the flood foal trotting beside her, she went down into it.

Kangaroo grass, green and succulent, grew there. Coolawyn had a few mouthfuls as the foal began to suck again. She was tired, and the warmth of the little hollow, and its security, made her sleepy. It was as though she slipped away in time and place, away from the sad and frightening present, away from the roaring snow melt.

The foal moved and she felt a sharp shock as she saw the white foal beside her. Surely her foal was black. Then the picture flashed into her mind of the dead, black foal being swept away by the flooded river.

She heard her own cry of misery, but the little foal nuzzled at her and, loving it, she licked its funny little face. Presently they moved to the edge of the hollow, and then she and the little white foal lay down to sleep under close-woven shrubs and tall eucalypts.

Pale grey mare and white foal lay sound asleep, and the roar of the river was almost carried away by the weird moan of the wind and the swishing and creaking of long streamers of bark hanging from the tall trees.

Later, the little foal awoke and cried a sad, little wuffling neigh, calling for something that was lost. Coolawyn's lips moved gently round his ears. She would give him love and comfort.

All through the mountains there was loss. The owls and the oldest of the kangaroos and emus were the only ones who could remember such a high and

swift-rising flood ... so much snow, so much snow to be washed away. There was deep snow in every gully; snow plastered thickly on every ridge and every wide mountain face. This wind that moaned through rocks and crevices, and howled in chasms, that might feel cold on a horse's wet hide, was actually warm and would loosen the snow for the rain to wash away and make torrents to pour off the mountains. Those torrents would carry the bodies of small kangaroos and wallabies, carry rats and snakes from their holes ... carry drowned foals.

Coolawyn was not the only mare to lose her foal, but she was the only one to whom the great gods of snow and wind, and rain and roaring flood, would give a pure white foal out of the raging stream.

They slept there, in that secure hollow, only disturbed occasionally by a fear that came in dreams. There had to be a tomorrow, many tomorrows, but, for the moment, sleep was needed to cure exhaustion, to start healing grief. Food was needed, and food was here.

Only some touch of the magic of the bush and the mountains could bless death, and grief and loss.

The immense rain and flood had been so sudden, and it had caused such terror, that a strange, lasting sensation of fear seemed to creep through the bush, to flow in the waters of every stream, to cry in the movement of leaf and in the moan of the wind.

The foal woke in the night, neighing with fear ... or loss. Coolawyn started to her feet, a vision in her mind of her foal. Then the little white foal blew through his nostrils, a sad, plaintive sound, and she pushed it towards her milk, to give it comfort.

Something very disturbing was in the night. None of the usual sounds of the bush were to be heard, for the wail of the wind, the creaking of the trees, and the rushing of water sounded over everything else. It seemed to Coolawyn that no other bird or beast was alive in the world, only herself and the white foal.

The foal lay down to sleep again, calmed by the warm milk, and Coolawyn herself had been calmed by the foal's rhythmic sucking. Another day would dawn, with rain or without rain; with a greater flood or with water receding. Another day for a pale grey mare and her flood-given foal.

There were no other horses near, because they had been unable to cross the raging torrent. Perhaps when the river dropped ...

When the dawn came, Coolawyn went to drink at a small round pool in the centre of their little hollow. She was thirsty and she drank deeply, knowing that the foal was watching her. When she moved away, the foal walked curiously to the pool. By the time he dropped his nose towards it, the water had become mirror-still again. As his nose got close to it, he sprang backwards, jumped

forward again, then swung round, as though expecting someone, and neighed wildly.

He turned back to the pool calling, calling to the pure white foal that he saw there in the water.

After his wild neighs there was only intense silence. He stared down at the pool, at the white foal that looked back at him, then raised his head and threw a sobbing call to the sky, and spun around, looking behind him. Then he began a frenzied galloping round and round the hollow, peering in behind bushes. He got more and more upset, rushing hither and thither. Coolawyn tried to quieten him, standing beside him whenever he stopped, exhausted. There he stood with all four legs planted apart, in the centre of the hollow, gasping for breath, until he could neigh again. At last he walked shakily back to the still pool, looked in, saw the white foal, bent right down to touch it with his nose, but it was only cold, cold water that his nose touched, and the foal's face broke up and rippled away from him.

He stepped back and crumpled in a heap.

Coolawyn lay down beside him, cradling him with her legs, trying to comfort him.

For what did he seek with such desperation? His mother? Coolawyn felt sure that in the same strange way that she had accepted him as a gift from the flood, he had felt that he was hers. Surely he was seeking something else?

What was it that he had seen in that still pool?

## *The Still, Round Pool*

All through the mountain forests there was the sound of water: the thunder of waterfalls and water rushing, swishing through overhanging branches and, further away from rivers and creeks, there was water whispering, seeping.

All these sounds melted into the mystery that floated around and over the mountains. Clouds might slide down the sky and touch a treetop — clouds with queer tales to tell. Sometimes a cloud might touch the pale grey mare and that ghostly white foal, and fill them with something that was fear and yet not fear, that was dread and yet not dread ... something that somehow could fill the mare with elation. The sound of the water became a pulse that beat in Coolawyn's body — the pulse beat of a storm.

Coolawyn and Yarralala grazed in their sheltered hollow — wraiths whose pale shapes were there, in the belting rain, then invisible. Sometimes a pale grey head would be between the rough trunks of two alpine ash or there was the faint outline of a white foal inside a stand of slender ribbon gums.

A wombat seeking food was earlier than the evening half-light because he knew that the night was going to be rough. He stopped near the opening of his burrow, and stared at the ghosts of a mare and foal.

There was something very strange. Nothing usually disturbed a wombat's life, but never had he known such a flood. It was the flood that had made his life so queer. There was almost no sound, except the noise the water made. No birds had sung all day, and the possums had not once quarrelled. Luckily, his hole was high up the ridge. Even a solid, strong wombat felt that something unusual was coming. He was almost worried.

Coolawyn barely saw the wombat. She was wondering where else they might find shelter and some good grazing if the creeks were too high to cross, but they could stay here for a while.

Yarra's nose touched her flank quite often, and each time she felt a tingling current flow from his nose through her hair, into her whole body. Each time she knew even more strongly that this little foal of the flood accepted her as his mother, and she felt happier — not so entirely bereaved. Yet she felt that there was something for which he was searching.

She also kept wondering what had happened to the herd with which she usually ran. Undoubtedly, the raging water had forced them to stay on the other

side of the river, where they had gone for good grazing, but had some of them drowned or been carried far, far downstream? Sometimes death by drowning and terrible disaster seemed to haunt her, to stay in her mind. There was a strong feeling in the air ... and she and Yarra were alone.

Night began to creep up from the valley, and it became more noticeable that there were no bird calls and no sound of any other animals. Not even a distant neigh could be heard. Coolawyn felt as though she and Yarra were the only horses left alive. Then, after they had grazed for a while and it was almost dark, from far, far away, drifting up through a gully below their basin, there sounded one neigh — a neigh filled with longing.

That call was, perhaps, for agony and loss. Burra, the big grey stallion, had seen Coolawyn and her foal swept down the river. Other mares had struggled out downstream and found the herd again, but never Coolawyn. A dead foal had been seen far downstream.

Burra called again and listened, head up, ears pricked. Several times he called, and each time he waited and listened intently. At last, just when the thundering beat and roar of the flood paused in its rhythm, there came a neigh. It came from so high that it almost seemed to drop from the rainclouds in the sky. Night flowed over mountains and valley, seeming to be called up by the longing in that neigh.

Burra's heart jolted inside his grey chest. That call had to be Coolawyn's — but what was that other sound in the dark? Galloping horses? Who were they? Horses did not gallop in the dark, like that, and the night was particularly black, with stormclouds. Drumming hooves were coming closer, then they seemed to stop quite near to the flooded river. Burra listened, straining to hear if the horses stood still or tried to plunge into the dark, swirling water.

Then, through the night, there came a forlorn neigh — a mare's neigh, filled with sadness and loss.

Something about that call made Burra's hair rise ... he knew it was not Coolawyn's call. It was a sound made by a totally strange mare. For a long time he listened and waited.

Much later in the dark night he heard a far away sound of galloping hooves again.

At last he and his small band of mares and foals slept.

As Burra stood, drowsing, dreaming, the memory of a tale that used once to be told by much older horses came to him. It was a legend about a herd that galloped through the darkest, most ghostly nights. Burra, half-sleeping, felt a shiver go down his spine. What was the rest of that legend? Was it that no good came to any horse who had heard the sound of the night gallopers? Or was it that

when those horses stampeded through the darkened bush, something disastrous was going to happen — or had happened? Was it because of the huge flood that those horses of the night had come back?

The wind was rising, the noise of it blending with the noise of the flood till, to Burra, the night seemed wildly savage and it all became part of a dream of disaster.

Coolawyn, in her sheltered basin, did not feel the icy wind on her hide, but heard it roaring through the high tops of the mountain ash trees, heard the creaking of the streamers of bark and the noise of them flapping and falling as the wind caught them. Creaking strips of bark in the wind; a drowned foal floating down the river; disaster was all around, and anguish. Coolawyn touched the little foal at her feet. Surely the storm gods would cease tormenting her soon, and this little white foal would seem to be the one which she had lost. Surely this foal belonged to her now.

Up above the hollow she heard branches breaking, splintering, cracking, and then the ground shook with an enormous thud as a giant tree no longer could stand the onslaught of the wind. Even over the sound of the storm and the flood she heard the quickly repeated, angry ‘Quark, quark, quark’ of a great glider whose sleep in his hollow must have been ruined.

Falling trees in the wind, a foal being swept away in the river. Something was wrong with her world, and it was very uncomfortable to be parted from her herd. She wished the wind would drop and the torrential rain ease off.

There was plenty of feed in this basin, and good shelter. Coolawyn was not going to leave that safe haven. She knew that nowhere was truly safe from that enormous wind, but this place seemed as sheltered as she could get, and here she would stay with her white foal.

The wind buffeted and blasted, roared in the high mountains above, and moaned through the rocks, sounding more and more ghostly and threatening.

A black-shouldered kite, tossed and flung hither and thither by the wind, dropped beside her. Coolawyn found herself shaking with fright until the bird, getting its breath back, took off and flew into a candlebark.

It was in this night that she, too, first heard the sound of horses galloping in the dark. She was shaking all over with fear even as she woke.

The galloping horses were far down, on flatter country, perhaps on the other side of the river, but she knew the sound was sinister, and as the sound grew fainter and fainter, old stories began to surface in her memory — things she had heard and forgotten a long time ago ... old legends ... old tales ...

Those horses who galloped unerringly through the bush at night were not in themselves evil — in fact, no one had really seen them to know ... though,

perhaps years ago? ... It was just that they were only ever heard in the mountains when some disaster had happened or was going to happen. And there was that rather queer whisper in the wind that told of occasions when the horses of the night were heard and one filly would vanish; and perhaps died.

There had been a sort of murmur amongst the mares, a story passed down of a half-seen vision of a splendid stallion driving on an almost invisible herd; phantoms leaping logs, dodging tree trunks. That was all so long ago that it must be a different stallion; maybe the stallion who now owned that impossibly imagined herd, would be a son of the one who once was so wonderful. Maybe, if he existed, he was wonderful himself.

The drumming of hooves had faded right away. Coolawyn was cold. She wrapped herself closer round that little white foal, and wished that she could feel warm.

The wind cried in the rocks, and sometimes it sounded like voices ... voices talking, voices singing ... distant and solemn ...

Then, all of a sudden, the eeriness was gone. To Coolawyn, the wind's voice became the promise of spring, of scent and warmth. She leapt to her feet, for surely there was someone else, or a dream ... or, a feeling of wonder ... She heard a sound that was like music of intense happiness. The wind was dropping, or at least it only swirled round the timbered rim of their hollow. All time ceased ... she lay down. Was there a faint and beautiful form of a horse — a white horse — in the stormy night? She slept peacefully beside the foal whom she had claimed.

In the morning there was still the fragrance of spring. There were hoof marks like Burra's, but the foal had trodden all over them, and they may have been just a dream. A currawong called, high in the sky. The storm was over.

Far down below her, across the river, Burra called, and she threw a joyous neigh in answer. The dream was still with her, filling the air, half-faded, half-real. And Burra's call told her he was coming.

The following night Burra had brought his herd much further up the river. The water was dropping and he knew he would be able to get the foals across by morning at the same place as he had struggled across back and forth in the dead of that night. This was the last night that they would sleep on the western bank, and through the night there were stealthy movements that woke Burra. A few stars shone in the sky, but there was a red star shining through the thick, strong-smelling mint bushes that grew in the surrounding bush.

Presently there came the strong feeling in every hair of his hide that he was being watched. There was no scent other than the mint bushes. That red star

seemed to move back and then vanish. Surely it could not be an eye!

Burra gave a great leap at where the red star had been in the bushes. Something sprang away, right away. A dingo howled and a possum barked. Burra bounded on through the scrub, but the bush was empty. All he had left was the memory of a red star in a prostanthera bush.



### *Someone, Something, Trying to Cut Them Out of the Herd*

Burra called quite often, and Coolawyn answered him. She knew that he would have to find a good crossing of the river. In fact, that was what he was doing, and she thought of him going back and forth on slippery stones, and across onto great boulders, leading mares and foals through the swiftly-running river.

Coolawyn led Yarra out of their sheltered hollow, through the cleft in the rocks, and then headed up on to the spine of the ridge. She looked back at their tree-encircled hollow and blew a soft farewell through her nostrils. The trees and shrubs, and the good grass, had protected and fed them, and seemed now as she looked back into it, to be graced by some magic.

Yarra had gone over and over again to the little quiet pool in the centre, and become frantic over something which he saw there. Finally, Coolawyn had gone with him to look into the still water. All she could see was her own reflection and that of Yarra. Yarra had given a sad snuffling sound and turned to her for milk. The only time he went back to the pool again was just when she was leading him towards the way through the rocks. He had darted back, looked into the pool, and neighed. Then he followed her, looking all around as he went.

Coolawyn saw a black-shouldered kite hovering directly above the hollow. The same bird that had dropped exhausted at her feet in that wild night of the storm. Now it hovered and called. It was not the pure white hawk ... the outward and visible symbol which the spirit of the Silver Brumby sometimes took, but somehow a sign of the 'black and white of the hour' — black foal, white foal. Then a thrush burst out singing.

Coolawyn walked up the steep slope to the ridge, and it seemed to her that the rocks closed together behind them, and the trees and the scrub became impenetrable, so that the secret place would for ever be secret.

Just for a moment the hovering kite hung over them.

The mare with the white foal walked down the spine of the ridge, going to meet the herd.

Foals that are going to turn grey are born black. Coolawyn was aware that her foal, which the flood had drowned and swept away from her, had been black. Here she was with a tiny white foal, the like of which the herd had not seen before, whose eyes were unusual and who obviously had lost something of great importance to him.

It was evening when they came face to face with the herd, with the big grey stallion Burra greeting Coolawyn. His mostly grey mares, with some coal-black foals, were pleased to see Coolawyn. There was a certain air of surprise, but they were all tired, and there were flooded creeks ahead between them and their own bimble. Their usual grazing ground was in that wide valley of the Ingegoodbee River, south of the Cascades, with its beautiful big candlebark trees, its calm shelter. The biggest problems would be crossing Dale's Creek and Tin Mine Creek; both could be raging torrents.

The herd would have to make its way along Quambat Ridge, almost to Quambat Flat, because Dale's Creek flowed through a deep, rough canyon. The canyon was Baringa's, silver grandson of that mysterious Silver Brumby. Baringa would not hurt them, but the very young foals would not be able to get down the wall of the canyon.

They slept one night to one side of the ridge, because the foals were tired, and the next night found shelter just off Quambat Spur. Burra went down, that evening, to see if he could find Son of Storm, the big, gentle brown stallion who was usually to be found on Quambat Flat.

Down on the clear wide flat, above which is the very head of the Murray River, the rain had obviously been tremendous. Every footfall squelched, and water lay in any little hollow. Son of Storm's herd was all spread through the fringe of bush on the side of the Cobberas Mountains. Son of Storm came to meet Burra and they walked about together. Even on Quambat Flat, Son of Storm had heard the beat of galloping hooves in the night, and was worried. Even he, Burra realised, was invaded with the uneasiness that had seeped through the bush. The tales of the brumbies who galloped at night had been revived.

As Burra and Son of Storm walked together, stride for stride, there came the same neigh from far up the Limestone River. The two friends stopped, every muscle stiffening. The neigh came from a long way away, but it was not the neigh of a stallion whom either of them knew.

Burra's mares had heard that distant call, but only Coolawyn was disturbed by it. Her restlessness, and the obvious anxiety of the white foal, upset Burra. For himself, the stallion's neigh had called up a vision of a red star shining through the mint bushes, and the scent of mint. Red star — or an eye gleaming red. Burra's curiosity was ignited by that neigh and into his mind, too, came the sound of galloping hooves through the night.

Days and nights slid by. Burra's herd, going around the heads of flooded creeks, reached the lovely valley of the Ingegoodbee. Both Burra and Coolawyn knew

that there had not been one stallion's call to break the peace, but in each one's head was that memory of galloping hoofbeats in the night.

Any strange sound that came after the last birds had settled to sleep made Burra immediately wide awake, ears pricked as he listened tensely. Coolawyn was wondering what old tale was coming alive again, what truth was blowing in the wind?

Somewhere there was a dream that might have truth in it. One of the many owls who lived in hollows in the wide-spaced, red-splashed candlebarks might be old enough to have heard these galloping hooves when the brumbies of the night had come before.

She began wandering in the early darkness, listening to the first spring mating calls of the owls.

It was then that she realised that Yarra, who stumbled over logs so often when he played with the other foals, could go sure-footed in the night.

The soft whisper of owls' wings as they flew through the evening had things to tell of time and of distance. Time — she saw that foal grow, day by day; time measured by the growth of a foal. Distance — where had her foal really come from; how far had he travelled? From whence came that far away neigh, those drumming hoofbeats in the night; yet from where came that wild fragrance of spring? And what was it that the white foal saw in the still, small pool?

One evening, when the reflection of the sky was dim, and the earth all around one of the Ingegoodbee's pools was dark, she had watched Yarra staring at the picture which he saw in the dark water. His own reflection was now of something bigger and stronger than the reflection in the still pool of the fairy hollow. Was that what was puzzling him? He did not look around and then start frenziedly searching, the way he had done before. He seemed sad and worried, filled with an unanswered question. He turned to her for milk and comfort as he had always done before.

That night three or four owls were gathered together, murmuring amongst themselves. They were on a branch above where Coolawyn and Yarra were lying, Coolawyn listening and dreaming. Never had the owls seen so much water as in the recent flood. It was years since the night galloping brumbies had been driven by water from their grazing country lower down ... Coolawyn knew that the owls were troubled. They kept looking down at Yarra, sleeping below. Owls could see in the dark. They travelled through the night in silent flight. Owls were all-wise, heard everything, saw everything, understood mystery. They probably lived to a great age, so that legends of long ago might not seem to them such ancient tales. They were bound to know if the night-galloping brumbies were real.

Coolawyn herself barely believed that the owners of those drumming hooves existed. She felt that somewhere, and in some time, they were a fabulous dream. That that stallion who only seemed to be part of an age-old fairy tale, might just occasionally gallop across a thundercloud, be borne on the wings of the wind. Somewhere in the wind and in the rain, in the pulsing roar of the flood, there was the music of happiness even though there was fear.

An owl took off, silent-winged, and its call of 'mopoke, mopoke' was answered far ahead.

Then one bird called, just above, and rustled its wings. 'Mopoke,' it said softly. 'All is well. Mopoke.' Then it went on: 'Foals were lost and foals were won. Mopoke, mopoke. Wind and water and raging storm — both take and both bestow. Mopoke.' The owl shook its feathers again. 'The dark of the night and the bright light of the sun, the months and the years, roll by, and the all-magic snow spins a vision that is true, seen in the waters that flow off the Craggs and heard in the song of the thrush.'

Another mopoke began to call. 'Be wise,' its voice said, and the night wind gathered the words. 'We have the experience of years, storms, snow and burning sun, but the thrush sings of the secret of love.'

Suddenly the owls were gone, floating for a moment above the pale grey mare, and the foal that had come in the flood. Then they made a pattern of flight against the moon and vanished into the distance.

It was Yarra who moved off and Coolawyn found herself following.

They had come some distance from the herd as they followed the owls' voices, as they listened and wondered. Now that the owls had flown off, Coolawyn realised with a shiver of fear that there were stealthy sounds and an invisible, strong presence, something between them and the herd. A strong, invisible presence that was actually pushing Yarra and herself away from the herd. No one seemed to be there, and yet there was the pressure to go in a certain direction.

Yarra was a little ahead of her and she could tell that he was getting frightened. He turned back to her, and then suddenly broke away in a mad gallop, over logs and through little, squelching swamps, and she went with him, sometimes almost falling as she knocked her hooves against an unseen log, or as she stumbled in a hole. She galloped on as though animals whom she could never see were forcing them both up the valley of the Ingegodbey to its source.

Coolawyn did know every log, every wide-branched tree, and every hollow, yet in half-light or near-darkness, it was Yarra who went faultlessly.

Yarra was driven by fear of he knew not what. He seemed to have no fear of darkness. Coolawyn could see his white legs twinkling as he galloped. A branch

which she barely saw whipped across her face. Surely it was time to stop. Who was she, along with her white foal, to be thundering through the darkness like ... like what? Like the never-seen brumbies of the night ...? She propped to a standstill, threw her head up into the night sky, and called Burra with all her strength.

Burra's answer sounded immediately, and she knew he was coming, but between her and Burra was the invisible force. Suddenly something — several indefinite, but strong, presences — passed her, out on the wing. She heard them and perhaps saw vague, moving shadows ... felt them pass, and knew they were gone ...

In a moment, Burra had galloped right round Yarra, had stopped Yarra's mad galloping. Burra was looking after whatever had vanished, then he was heading her and Yarra back to the herd.

Something, someone, had tried to capture Coolawyn and her foal. Burra had saved them. Coolawyn watched the flickering forest of trees as they cantered back towards the east. 'Good or bad, good or bad' the rhythm beat of her hooves said, and an owl flew overhead.

## *Two White Foals*

There was a bronze cuckoo whistling sadly in the candlebarks along the Ingegoodbee Valley.

Burra knew it was not a man whistling up his dog, because he had heard that call along the Ingegoodbee, spring after spring. Burra was experienced in the sounds of the bush ... knew that birds came and went, just as stallions reached their prime and grew old, and younger horses took over their herds. Once upon a time many brumby hunters came and captured even old horses.

Burra felt strong ... he also felt anxious. Something very peculiar had entered into his usually calm life when that enormous flood came. In his mind there was the beating rhythm of those gallopers through the night — nothing had been the same since they came. Nothing had been the same since the flood.

There was that queer white foal of Coolawyn's. Yarra. It was not the black foal to whom she had given birth — and it seemed always to be searching for something, something which was an important part of its life. Burra knew that the white foal's unexplained loss made Coolawyn restless, too. But had something else happened during the flood?

Coolawyn had never forgotten that her foal had floated away, down the river. And this foal which the river gods had given her was somehow incomplete. She also had a weird half-dream, or half-memory — a fantasy of the night belonging to that fairy hollow below the alpine ash ...

She was not surprised when Burra began to move his herd down the Ingegoodbee into new country. New experience could drive away memories that were too deeply felt. Also, because of some memory of a lingering scent in Coolawyn's secret hollow, Burra seemed to be afraid that the night gallopers' stallion had seen her. They would probably find themselves in bimbles belonging to other stallions, but Coolawyn knew that Burra was peaceable by nature — also very big and strong.

During the first night, they camped and grazed undisturbed, but Coolawyn was sure that something, someone, was following their tracks. Yarra was very restless, always going back a little way, as though he were expecting someone.

Darkness was sliding through the trees one night when Yarra disappeared. Coolawyn turned back quickly to find him. There was Burra looking for him,

too, searching the bush at either side of the wide, gentle valley. Burra was aware that this white foal could be a disruptive element in his herd, and all the time he searched, he was keeping a lookout for whoever, or whatever, was following them.

Then Coolawyn saw something very strange. Burra saw it, too, and both the stallion and the mare stopped as still as statues. There was Yarra, white against a sunset sky, standing, gazing as though lost at another white foal, his exact replica.

A queer, shocked cry came from Coolawyn. Yarra turned his head towards her at the same time as a mare's neigh called the other foal, and it turned and drifted away, occasionally pausing to look back.

Burra had arrived at Coolawyn's side and, almost angrily, he collected Yarra and started driving them both towards his other mares and foals. Coolawyn looked back once. The other white foal was no longer there.

That night, faintly, faintly on the breeze, there was occasionally borne a wild rhythm almost beyond hearing, and yet which pulsed in the blood.

Yarra walked off into the darkness — little ghost, lissom and silent, threading his way between trees, ears pricked, eyes wide open. He felt afraid, yet he knew he was being drawn by invisible threads.

Coolawyn, with a cold sweat breaking down her back and all through her grey coat, woke and realised he had gone again. She set off immediately, following his scent. She was listening and feeling with every step she took, and it was obvious to her that he was walking slowly, so he might be listening too.

There it was ... or was it? The galloping drumbeat of hooves was so far off that she felt it in her veins rather than heard it. Then an owl called, and, instead of following Yarra's scent with her nose close to the ground, she raised her head and tried to see through the night. The moon was only hidden behind a thin veil of cloud, and she thought she saw the shape of Yarra, standing statue-still, not far ahead. Then the cloud slid away from a full moon and she saw him clearly. He was standing gazing into the distance, ears pricked as though he were listening intently.

He was in a clearing, and on the opposite side was a wall of lilac hovea bushes.

Through those bushes there stepped his perfect image, coming step after step a little closer, staring at Yarra.

'Mopoke, mopoke,' the owl called: 'Beware, beware,' and it flew into the little clearing, wings almost touching both foals, seeming to drive them back, each one, in the direction from which it had come.

It was time to call, and Coolawyn called.

From the other side of the clearing she heard a quiet neigh. Both foals turned away from each other and started to walk across the clearing. Each walked slowly, constantly looking around, each one, at his own mirror image.

Coolawyn and Yarra saw the hovea bushes part and let the stranger white foal through, then close behind him.

The clearing was empty. Yarra pressed close to Coolawyn. He looked as though he were dreaming — except his eyes were wider open than she had ever seen them before, and they no longer seemed unusual.

Coolawyn had an unforgettable vision in her mind. It was a vision of two exactly similar white foals — the same-shaped heads, same way of holding heads and necks, same way of flickering one ear, same way of standing. They were the same height, had the same fine legs, same wide-eyed stare. Two white foals faintly illuminated by soft moonlight. A dream vision? Yet Yarra was real, solid flesh and bone as she ran her soft, trembling nose all over his body, while something within her was almost bursting with love for this foal to which another mare had given birth.

Was that second foal real? She was absolutely certain that she had seen it — seen two moonlit foals standing alone, not touching each other, tense, almost trembling. She could feel a tremor going through Yarra now, as he pressed against her.

Who was that other foal and who was the mare who called so quietly?

There was a sound nearby. Suddenly Coolawyn found Burra beside her, Burra who had come to take them back ... Burra fearing a nameless disruption to his herd. The midnight gallopers, or the flood, or both had been like a horrible dream. He nosed Coolawyn and Yarra gently, to give them the gift of being his. He brought them back to the herd. Yarra dropped down to sleep, a tired bundle, but twitching all over as dreams possessed him.

Burra half-slept, staying between them and the probable area where the other white foal and its dam were grazing. Coolawyn did not sleep.

She watched Yarra's restless twitching and moved restlessly herself. There were so many unanswered questions, all of them taking shape or form, or taking flesh and blood in that other white foal. Who was he?

Really and truly, who was her foal, Yarra? Who was he, wide-eyed and sure-footed in the night, and almost blind on a bright day? He was hers; but she stumbled over logs in the dark while he galloped safely. Who was that other foal? Who was the mare?

The questions went on teasing her. Finally, she went to sleep.

No questions were answered in the new country in which they travelled the next



day. They crossed over a ridge and then dropped steeply down the Nine Mile, towards the Moyangul River. It was gravelly country, and some of the trees which brushed against their shoulders and flanks had needles on them, instead of eucalypt leaves.

They were aware that they were still probably being followed, hearing sounds, perhaps imagined, in the distance. Old, old legends whispered through the pine-clad slopes. All Burra could think of, as he stopped and tried to hear whatever it was away behind them, was that some other horses were trying to capture his mares — or one mare.

The feeling of being followed was in some way connected with the white foal, Yarra — connected with the two white foals, Yarra and his mirror image.

Darkness was rising up from the Moyangul River valley. Burra was looking for a patch of good grazing where they might stay for the night. Then faintly, from far below, down among the pines, there rose up the sound of horses galloping.

Every mare and foal had stopped when Burra stopped. Coolawyn, standing quite still, backed into a stunted snow gum, wondered if each one of the mares had heard that faint throb and beat? She was becoming very curious about the legendary night travellers.

Burra linked that almost threatening red star — or red eye — with them, and did not know why, but was anxious for Coolawyn. At the same time, he was unable to quell his own curiosity. He felt sure, in his bones, that the story about these night gallopers stealing a mare or a filly, each time they were heard, was really true.

Coolawyn, for her part, had a queer creeping feeling that someone was trying to capture her. Who were these horses of the night, if they existed?

Burra was not going to take his mares down into that deep valley. The best thing to do would be to leave them in a safe place for them to graze and sleep, and go down into the Moyangul alone. He would see if there *were* horses who galloped in the darkness, and if they stayed hidden there. But was there anyone following? Once again he listened intently. All he heard — or imagined — was that almost whispered rhythm of galloping far, far away below.

He turned the herd back, and found a good camping place away from the shaley gravel and those pine trees. He left them there, and Coolawyn watched him go.

Burra walked back to the edge of that steep drop, and stepped over the edge and went as quietly as possible down the gravel.

The moon was just less than full, and the pine trees stood out against the moonlit clouds, making a fantasy world for a brumby who had lived all his life among eucalypts.

It did not take him very long, slithering and sliding on the loose gravel, to get down to the bottom, even though he took the last few feet more slowly, wondering just what he was going to find. He had indeed stopped in his descent occasionally, to listen, and really he had heard nothing, but he was sure that the scent of strange horses rose up on the warmer valley air.

Once he reached the valley floor, Burra was thinking of that night when the flood had cut him off on the far side of the river. That was the night he had seen one piercing, burning, red star through the prostanthera — or, one calculating, assessing, reddish eye.

Now, if he thought he saw eyes watching him and leaped forward, there was nothing. Surely he would have caught whatever was there, but he felt nothing beneath his leaping hooves. Perhaps the scent of an unknown mare or colt hung there momentarily.

Just occasionally, he was sure there were horses whose eyes shone in the moonbeams.

## *In the Dark of the Pines*

Coolawyn had watched Burra go back towards that valley where the pine trees grow. He was going to search for those horses who might only be a dream. She, too, wanted desperately to know they were real — wanted to see them ... as, it seemed, did Yarra.

She would go after Burra, sneak away without the rest of the herd hearing her go. Coolawyn backed quietly into the bush, and went a roundabout way to get onto the track that Burra had taken. There was no sound of anyone following them.

Yarra kept close to her flank and quarters. Perhaps it was surprising that Yarra did not try to get back to where he had seen that white foal. He just followed her, and when they went over the edge to go down into the deep valley, he was as surefooted and quiet as a chamois.

Coolawyn found that she slipped and slithered more than he did, particularly as the night grew darker. Then the moon came from behind a cloud, and that helped her find the easiest way down. She could see where to set each hoof on that loose gravel. It was difficult not to have gravel sliding away, making a loud rustle; difficult not to kick a stone which would keep clattering down until the sound died in the distance. Burra had not worried about any noise: she was trying to be quiet.

As she slid and scrambled down, it seemed that they were searching for horses that became more and more of a fairy tale. She felt that some zephyr of unreality had continued to blow over the mountain world since that vast downpour and flood.

Now, the pointed pines were dark against the moon, making a treescape such as she had never seen before, strange, sinister ...

A stone broke away from her hoof and went bounding down the hillside.

Coolawyn would have begun to feel afraid if it were not for her enormous wish to see those horses galloping through the night — if, of course, they existed.

Yarra was nervous, and he kept up against Coolawyn, particularly if she stopped to get her breath and listen. Then Yarra, too, would throw up his head, and listen. He wondered about the other white foal, but in this strange valley he knew he wanted to be with Coolawyn quite desperately.

They were getting near the floor of the valley. Once, through the pines, moonlight could be seen gleaming on water. Coolawyn stopped to listen again. Suddenly a tremor went through Yarra, all along his back, as he heard a sound. She heard that sound, too — a distant neigh, and certainly not a neigh which she had ever heard before.

It was a stallion's neigh. Coolawyn crept under a very tall pine, and Yarra pressed in against her flank. She peered through the thick needles, but could see nothing. The needles prickling around her nose made her want to sneeze. That neigh had come from a long way off. She wondered if she was going to find out what she had come down into the valley to learn? Or was she making the terrible mistake of letting night gallopers know that she was in the valley, easy to capture? Should she go back quietly?

The needles prickled along her withers and back.

There was no further sound, and, unable to curb her curiosity, she stepped out from under her covering pine tree.

Yarra was extremely nervous now: that stallion's neigh had made fear come, creeping like a ghost out of the pines to touch hair and hide. He clung to Coolawyn's flanks, and got in under her neck if she stopped moving to listen.

She, too, began to feel panic. There were no other horses to be seen, and this dark, pine forest held something that was nebulous, printless, terrifying.

They got near to the river and the sound of rushing water through the darkness made Yarra utter a little cry. Coolawyn put her nose down to his head, and led him away from the sound of the stream.

Where was Burra? How far had he gone?

Ahead, there was a small, open area into which moonlight fell, so that it glowed surrounded by dark trees. Coolawyn stood quietly, still hidden in the trees, when into that moonlit space there walked a colt. The colt was white, but made into pewter by the liquid light of the moon.

The colt turned his head enough for Coolawyn to see his face, and a moonbeam flashed into his eyes and they glowed the colour of sunset. Then, as though something called, he turned across the clearing, and vanished into the dark pines.

Surely, Coolawyn thought, that colt was one of the midnight gallopers: then she wondered if she had seen him, if his eyes really had glowed. She felt a longing to be safely back in their Ingegoodbee Valley under one of those beautiful candlebarks, with Yarra safely beside her.

They would go back the way they came, but before she had moved at all, something made the branches part between the pines, and as Burra stepped out into the clearing, there was a pounding of hooves.

Just then, the clouds sailed over the moon, and the whole valley became pitch dark. The drumming of hooves grew closer. Three, then four young horses raced by in the dense dark of the night. Were they light coloured? Were they sure-footed in the dark? Who could tell ... they had passed and gone without trace.

Coolawyn would have stayed perfectly quiet, hoping that Burra did not get her scent, but Yarra gave a frightened neighing sound, neither snuffle, nor scream, and he was shaking all over. In a moment, Burra was standing peering at them through the pine branches.

Burra was anxious. He had meant them to stay with the herd. Now there was no question about what they should do. Burra nudged them, quite gently, towards the big climb out of that dark valley. He rubbed his head down Coolawyn's neck, and she realised that he was glad to be with her. Curiosity had faded for a moment. All that was important now was to get safely back to the herd, and back into the Ingegoodbee Valley.

The unstable, sliding gravel, the stunted pine trees higher up those stones, moonlight coming and going and time, also, sliding by. There they were, climbing upwards, bound together by some mystery, and the foal, itself part of a mystery — the same mystery or another.

Burra did rest at last, on a small, flat shelf, about two-thirds of the way up out of the valley, and the three stood, half-hidden in a clump of pines. Clouds cleared away from the moon. Suddenly, there was that sound of thundering hooves, quite close. Then, over on the top of the ridge and down the steep gravel slope, there burst six or eight wildly galloping horses.

They looked neither to right nor left, but went at breakneck speed, scattering gravel from their hooves — when their hooves touched ground. They were almost flying.

Three mares with foals followed, only a little more slowly.

Going so fast and in the silvery light of the moon each horse, each mare, each foal, looked like an insubstantial vision. Only the speed and the sound of their hooves was real.

Burra and Coolawyn stood as though petrified. Yarra gave a sudden cry of fear, and from below there came an almost inaudible neigh. It was the two neighs, Yarra's and that other's, which brought life and movement back to Burra and Coolawyn. They began to climb rather more quickly — fear, or mystery, on their heels.

Once on top, once they had walked quickly and quietly along the ridge, they merged into the herd without any sound. The only sound was an owl's call of warning, and the whisper of an owlet-nightjar's soft wings as it brushed Yarra's

head.

Then, as they stood among the sleeping mares and foals, through the quiet night there came the heavy wingbeat and occasional honking call of black swans rising out of the Moyangul River, flying from the deep valley over the ranges to the Indi River, whose waters would be calmer now that the main flood had gone.

Coolawyn looked up at the sky. There they were, long necks stretched out, long necks and heavy bodies floating between her and the moon. Their call came again, and from the hillside nearby, a dingo howled eerily in answer.

Who would know the truth of some of the weird legends that were weaving through the bush? Those swans who had taken off with heavy wingbeat, thrashing the river, their red feet running on the surface of the water, or wide-travelling dingo? Coolawyn looked at Burra where he lay, not even stirring as the swans flew over in the night. He was exhausted, so he must have gone far and fast in that mysterious valley of the pines. Perhaps all he had seen or heard — or had not seen — had exhausted him.

From some waterhole, far off down the ridge, the harsh cry of a bittern came. This time Burra stirred and Coolawyn saw him put up his head to listen. There was nothing except the usual repeated noise of crickets. Dawn would come. The moon would become a white disc in the west, and mysteries would fade away.

Burra had had enough of the Moyangul River valley and its dark pines. He would take his herd back to the Ingegoodbee, or further to where the rivers flowed to the west, and there might be no more sounds of galloping hooves in the night. But from where had they come, and where would they go?

Were there two herds of horses of the night? Did some live in among the dark pines of the Moyangul, and the others lower down on those west-flowing rivers? Was that really a red eye which Burra had seen through the bushes, or was it a star? Surely, way, way down the Indi was the night gallopers' bimble?

The following evening, the herd was happily grazing, spread out along the gentle Ingegoodbee. The grass was sweet, the candlebarks and snow gums created their own well-known landscape, magpies and currawongs called, even the wild cries of the black cockatoos who flew towards the west did not seem to give any warning.

The foals were chasing each other through the trees, Yarra waiting till the last oblique rays of the sun had gone. None of the foals noticed that he did not stumble over fallen branches once the bright light had gone, and that he went fast then, and with confidence. Yarra felt happy. For the first time he was going faster than the others. In fact, in the half-light, one of them fell over a log.

There was a half-sister of Coolawyn's — much younger — grazing far out on her own. Yarra started to go towards her through the dim light. Night seemed

to rise from the ground and slide out of the trees. He went under a spreading snow gum, still watching her through the leathery leaves.

Even when he saw the shapes of three horses creeping round her he was not worried. Then he saw them close in. They were urging her away from the herd. He realised that they were strangers, but there was nothing menacing about them until she tried to turn back to join her usual mates.

Yarra gave a snort of wild fear and raced away, back to Coolawyn. Coolawyn was safety and warmth, and love. What if strangers tried to steal *her*?

No other foal or mare seemed to have noticed anything, until the scent of strange horses drifted on the night breeze. Burra picked up the trace of unusual scent first. He gave an angry squeal, and followed the scent for quite a distance, picking up that of the two-year-old filly too.

Coolawyn had walked up close to him. She saw the sweat break out behind his ears. He turned to touch her with his nose, giving her his trust and affection, and to make sure she was really there. The filly's scent was rather similar to Coolawyn's, but he knew that Coolawyn would be difficult to steal, having a much stronger nature than her half-sister. He had recognised that strength when she was only a foal with her mother — a mare whom he, himself, had stolen.

Burra went trotting on, following the strange scent and that of the filly, and Coolawyn and Yarra followed him, going through the dense shadow of trees in the darkness. Coolawyn stopped when Yarra seemed to tire, and when it was obvious from the tracks that the horses ahead had begun to go faster, driving the filly in front of them.

Burra quickened his pace, too, but as the darkness became denser, he found it difficult to keep going so fast.

Coolawyn waited. She had known that Brinda, her half-sister, would go to another herd sometime, but it was as though these horses had been sent to *capture* someone — an unusual sort of theft fulfilling the old legend that those horses who galloped by night always took a filly, or mare, away with them.

There were ducks flying across in the night sky, and she saw them drop low, as though they were watching something. Coolawyn wondered what Burra would do. After all, Brinda was his daughter and she had not wanted to go.

By this time, other mares and foals had joined Coolawyn. Burra had been missed, and the touch of unreality that had beset them in the area of the Moyangul Valley returned so strongly that it was like a whisper going through the mob ... 'They've come. They've taken one of us.'

Coolawyn shivered. She had a strong feeling that it was really herself whom the three horses had been sent to capture. Her mind went racing, swirling with a mixture of something that was half memory and wild excitement; something

which seemed to mix in her mind with the roar of flood and wind.

Burra did not return till morning, his legs all bruised and bleeding where he had hit logs and branches as he followed those horses through the dark night.

He returned alone.

Coolawyn made sure that she stayed near him, in the centre of the herd.



## *A Whirlwind of Rage*

Fillies always left their sire's herds, went off in groups of young ones, or were taken by a young stallion. This had been different, and not only Coolawyn thought the young horses had been told to get Coolawyn herself. Burra, too, was afraid that the big, white stallion meant to steal her away.

Burra took his herd along the old cattle track from the head of the Ingegoodbee, through Pack Saddle Gap, then along above the immensely tall alpine ash that grew high over the fall into the Indi River. From there he took them further north into the valley of the Cascades.

The Cascades is a wide open valley, an unlikely place for marauders to come, unless Brinda followed Burra's herd and her captors followed her. At least, for a day or so, Burra and his herd could graze there and watch to see if any other horses came.

Every rise, every hollow, every small creek had its own history. Sometimes there seemed to be a great silver stallion high up on one of the surrounding hilltops. Sometimes, a big, fierce, grey stallion was a furious ghost trumpeting anger, for there had been that silver horse who defeated that grey to become king. Coolawyn was enfolded in stories, stories of the Snowy Mountains and of the strong and wonderful brumbies — so strong that they and their actions lived on in the place for ever, this place where they had lived and loved.

Coolawyn woke one night seeing a silver foal in front of her. At first she thought it must be Yarra, but Yarra was sleeping by her side, and the dream — if it were a dream — faded and she was left in the mist of ancient tales that clung for ever to the Cascade valley.

There was one story — or ballad — that the Cascade Creek rarely sang, for it was a ballad of hoofbeats made by horses who did not belong there. Coolawyn and Burra, grazing day after day in the lovely spring sunshine, could almost forget the fear that the flood had brought.

Brinda did not come looking for her own herd, but who would know if she had gone happily or in fear? When Coolawyn wondered about her, she felt deeply that those horses who galloped in the dark really did exist and had mistakenly taken her half-sister. Who was that half-dreamt white horse in the secret hollow? Then it was a cold fear that Coolawyn felt, as though a thick frost descended over her back. Maybe they would still come for her — surely they

would if they had taken Brinda by mistake. She felt cold as if it were mid-winter ... frost thick on her back ... Why was she thinking of that magic hollow where she and Yarra had rested after escaping from the flood, where the wings of the black-shouldered kite had wafted the scent of spring all around her? Why was there something unexplained about that hollow ... about Yarra's strange behaviour at the little, still pool?

They grazed peacefully in the Cascades. Burra was not really bothered about losing Brinda. There had not been a young stallion for her to go with, or she would have gone earlier. He was much more worried about the safety of his herd, particularly Coolawyn. The wild, night gallopers must have, undoubtedly, been the ones who took Brinda. Was that not the tale told, the tale whispered in the wind? All he could do was keep a watch over Coolawyn and all his mares. Why had he felt uneasy about that white foal, Yarra, ever since she appeared with him? He was so strangely the odd one in his herd. Anyway, here, in the Cascade Valley, he would see any unknown horses — unless they crept in by night.

It was in the dark of the moon that something happened. Yarra knew it was going to happen. The robin redbreast, who had lived for years nearby the empty slab-and-shingle cattlemen's hut, knew also, and sounded a warning.

The frail songs of robins had been heard from Baringa's Canyon, near to the Tin Mine falls, and were carried on by other robins, through the snow gums that overlooked the silent pools where the Ingegoodbee headed. Frail robin songs took up the word in every tea tree-filled creek above the Indi River — and these almost inaudible robin songs sounded all night long.

Yarra knew without being told that he was, once more, going to see that other white foal, and knew he was the one for whom he had been searching ever since the flood.

Yarra had become more and more adventurous since they had gone down into that pine-filled valley — and climbed safely out of it.

Coolawyn did not worry at first when, one night, he walked off towards the black sallee tree, near the empty hut. This was the robin's tree, from where the robin usually sang. Coolawyn did realise that, on this night, there was something urgent in the robin's song. She, too, began to move in the direction of the black sallee tree.

Yarra stood intently watching the snow gums up the slope behind the hut. He was waiting for something that he seemed simply to know was going to happen. Then, out of the trees stepped that other foal, just a blur of white, as Yarra himself was a blur of white in the darkness. The other foal stood there like a

statue, too, but both foals had more confidence now. After a few moments had passed, they began to walk slowly towards each other, two white wisps of mist.

This time neither Coolawyn nor the shadow mare in the snow gums made a sound to bring the foals back.

Here was that which had to happen.

The frost was laying cold fingers on Coolawyn's back again, because somehow she knew that these foals had some connection with those horses who galloped by night. She could not force her legs to move. She simply stood, shaking all over as she saw the two foals get closer, then close enough to let their noses move gently together, then over each other's faces.

Even in the dark, Coolawyn could see, or half-imagine their absolute sameness. Surely their scent must be different. Yarra must have her scent, at least while he still drank her milk? She remembered her milk spurting all over his face as she had pushed him — wet from the floodwater — to suck and be warmed. It was true from that moment that she would know this foal, whom the flood had given her, for ever and for ever.

She began to move slowly towards the foals, and the other mare came out of the snow gums and walked towards them, too.

Winter's frost seemed to coat Coolawyn all over. Nothing must take Yarra from her: nothing.

The strange mare looked back at the thick and twisted snow gums. Coolawyn was sure that she was listening to something moving in the trees. All of a sudden, and for the second time in several days, Coolawyn felt panic.

It was too dark to see who, or what, was coming through the snow gums behind the strange mare. Coolawyn called Yarra, commanding urgently. The other mare called her foal, and the desperation in her call seemed to strike a chord of memory within Yarra, because he stopped, and looked back.

Coolawyn called again to make Yarra understand that, without doubt, she meant him to come. She had intended to take him back to the herd, now, but there, on the fringe of snow gums, she caught a glimpse of movement and the scent of those three who had stolen Brinda.

If she turned to gallop away, they would catch her, and catch Yarra, too. She suddenly felt herself shaken with fury, and she felt the same strength that possessed her when she pulled Yarra back from the flood.

She turned and took Yarra back far enough for him to learn that he had to stay where she put him, then she galloped madly at the three shapes emerging from the trees and which were quite nebulous in the faint light of the night. If they were the ones who had taken Brinda, they were three large, young horses. She became a whirlwind of rage. There was less than even faint starlight now,

but she could see the three colts galloping out to meet her.

Coolawyn had no time to be thankful that they had come out into the open, that they had left the protective tangle of snow-gum boughs and trunks, the trees that would have been disastrously difficult for her. Yet, there she was, fighting in the open, determined that neither she nor Yarra would be caught, and hoping that her screams of rage would bring Burra.

She dashed at these robber horses, kicked and bit, dodged and struck, and kept up a constant screaming. Coolawyn had never fought before, but she knew instinctively how to cause fear in these big, immature colts. She must be quick, nimble and desperately ferocious — a ferocious quicksilver being.

Even to eyes that could see well in darkness, she was just a smudge of grey, here and then gone, dealing out sharp bites and very strong kicks.

When the colts had got over their first shock at her wild attack, they began to try to drive her into the snow gums. Coolawyn felt herself going quite mad with fury, leaping at them, mouth open, screaming, teeth bared, ears back, and screaming. She had to be crazy: she had to frighten them right away, so that their memory of abject fear would go with them, back to their own herd. These night gallopers must learn that they could not come again.

She spun round and round, never staying still, never being in the same place twice. Somehow she had realised that the colts seemed to be able to see her more than she could see them. She strained her eyes even harder. She saw a colt's head, clearly, and struck at it, felt her hoof making solid contact, but she herself was pushed off-balance by another of the colts ...

Their scent rose strongly around her.

At last she heard Burra thundering towards them. A neigh from some distance off apparently called the young horses, and suddenly they were leaving. A call hung in the air, and only a faint scent remained.

Coolawyn stood poised to leap, but there was only emptiness at which to leap. The young horses had gone.

Burra followed them, nose to ground. Another neigh sounded in the darkness. Coolawyn stood gazing into the night. A flash of lightning momentarily lit the sky, and thunder rolled some distance away. Then a scent came on the breeze, and a memory ...

Coolawyn found Yarra standing beside her. Together they walked to the robin's tree, and stood under its thick branches, for rain might come, and part of that memory was rain, and flood, and alpine ash.

### *White Statue Horses in the Bush*

Yarra stood dreaming.

Thunder rolled, far away, over in the direction in which those colts had gone. Then sheet lightning lit up a vast arc of sky, and threw a white light over miles of bushland.

Yarra was dreaming the sort of dreams that an older horse who had experienced many seasons would dream; dreams containing a mixture of memories and longing for something which he did not understand.

Out of the depth of his mind came pictures which made him begin to move restlessly. Coolawyn watched him, knowing he was in some other place. Half-sleeping, he cried out as lightning illuminated the bush. There was an answering cry — a foal's cry — and Yarra became fully awake and threw up his head.

Real, or unreal: there were the mare and the white foal, who could be Yarra, standing among some snow gums, not very far away, having remained, half-afraid, hidden in thick scrub. The snow gums that surrounded them should block them from view, yet both Coolawyn and Yarra saw them. Some strong magnetism drew Yarra. He began moving very slowly, towards that insubstantial dream, and Coolawyn went too — one leg after another, barely moving.

The sheet lightning had faded. They picked their way carefully through twisted snow-gum trunks and a puzzle of fallen logs, until they found themselves on the old cattle track. Thunder rumbled ahead. Lightning constantly lit up the half-overgrown track. They saw an illusive white mare and the faint shape of a foal, standing still as statues, in the lightning, and then walking on, barely visible in the dark. They seemed to be able to thread their way through clumps of dark wattle, or over and around fallen logs, with complete certainty.

Coolawyn and Yarra followed. It was as though something impelled them to go forward. Coolawyn knew that they were being called, though there was no sound. She stumbled occasionally over a rock which she had not seen in the dark, or a rotten log ...

The track had turned down. They just went on and on, steeply downwards, lower and lower, going down through the night. The track had been made by thousands of hooves of cattle as they were driven up or down, to and from the high country. The lower they got, the louder and closer became the sound of falling water.

Yarra obviously heard it and was afraid, but he went on, still looking ahead for the occasional glimpse of the wraith-like white foal.

Coolawyn knew that there was an unusual excitement about Yarra. Might he be nearing the discovery of whatever it was that he had sought so desperately from the time she had struggled to pull him out of the raging river. His most agonised searching had been the time when he went to drink at the little, still pool in the secret hollow. Only his own face had looked back at him out of that pool.

Coolawyn made her mind like a blank wall against the suggestion that there was a link between Yarra and the brumbies who galloped by night, that they might take him away. They were trying to capture her. She knew that because of their hunt for her she had become a danger to Burra's herd. Most worrying of all was the deep attraction the other white foal had for Yarra.

There was that white foal again, standing haloed by lightning. She could have believed it to be Yarra as soon as the lightning faded, but Yarra flung himself towards it in a wild gallop. The foal waited for one second only before melting away.

At the foot of the track there was a small, grassy flat alongside the river. There was also the sound of falling water.

Clouds rolled overhead and thunder crashed. The steep track flattened just before it reached the grass. Another sheet of lightning lit the sky, and the water gleamed in front of them as the river rushed by. The little flat was empty of anyone else.

Yarra made a distressed sound. He had followed that other foal all this way, and now ... there was nothing. There was absolutely nothing. Coolawyn felt as if they were prisoners — prisoners of the dark and of the steep spur down which they had come, of the river, and the waterfall which they could hear. Coolawyn knew it was a long, long cascade of tumbling water.

Their real captor — the idea of the brumbies that galloped by night — had vanished away.

Thunder crashed, cracked, rolled and rumbled, and the whole area was lit up. The river glittered by. The waterfall, the cascading creek, was a thousand diamonds. Coolawyn thought she heard something else, too, in any pause in the noise of the thunder, but then the light was gone. The continuing thunder began to drown even the song of the river.

Yarra felt tired and despondent. He pressed tight against Coolawyn's flank. The darkness, in between each blaze of lightning, was intense. It was strange standing there, far below the Cascade Valley and beside the huge waterfall that gave the creek and the valley its name. The almost invisible, hurling water was

not like the flood in which they were nearly borne away, but it was frightening. Yarra pushed his head under Coolawyn's near foreleg. She was real and comforting.

There was another sound ... a footfall. Then, in the next blaze of lightning they saw the other white foal standing, stopped in mid-stride by the brilliant light, eyes closed. It was a vision which vanished when the light vanished, then they could again hear the foal walking.

Yarra stood quite still, every hair tingling. He knew the foal was coming to welcome him.

Another rumble of thunder brought a lingering, soft light into the sky.

Coolawyn gazed at the two foals — the two trembling noses touching, the two pairs of flickering ears.

She, too, put her nose to the head of the second foal, to make sure it was real. It was flesh and bone, as solid as Yarra. Its scent was the same as Yarra's, but differing slightly. He was not a dream, but who was this second foal? Who was Yarra?

There was almost silent movement down the steep ridge and along the riverbank. Shadow horses were gathering around.

That mare, the mother of the second foal, was close.

Coolawyn felt a sudden anger as the mare sniffed Yarra, then she calmed down. She, Coolawyn, had herself sniffed at the second foal, but she could not help snorting with annoyance when that white mare seemed too interested. Yarra was hers. For a moment she felt again, in all her body, that fierce struggle with the flooded river, felt Yarra being torn from her grip of his mane, then her wild grab at him, the desperate effort to pull him to the bank.

There was a long drawn-out roll of thunder, and sheet lightning lit up everything around them. Even the great, tall alpine ash that grew much farther up the ridge, showed clearly. To Coolawyn, it seemed as if there were white horses, frozen to statue stillness, scattered everywhere through the bush.

There was one beautiful white stallion, stopped by the lightning to an intense stillness, on the last steep pitch of the spur, so that he stood as if struck to stone for ever. Even at that distance, Coolawyn could see that his eyes were closed against the glare, see that there was something unusual about his head.

Yarra's eyes were closed, too, in that bright light. It was as though each one of those white horses was totally arrested by the light. Then the light was gone. She saw that still picture breaking up into numbers of pieces; the white horses were moving again, all converging on herself and Yarra. That noble stallion would be close to them both in a few moments.

The three white colts had failed to capture her, but the white foal and its dam had called to Yarra to go with them, and there they were, drawn by some mysterious current between the two identical foals.

With a sudden jolt of fear, Coolawyn realised that she and Yarra had gradually become encircled by these horses who galloped through the night. They were all white: she wasn't white, but Yarra was.

She stood with the white horses getting closer and closer. She realised that there was nothing she could do, only wait and see what happened next. Her own herd would miss her, but she and Yarra had brought trouble and fear to them. Brinda had been taken in mistake for herself, and there was no sign of Brinda here.

The thunder's rumbling and crashing ceased briefly. The bush was quiet except for the sound of the river and the cascade ... the river, it was the river which had given her Yarra. Yarralala, the foal of the flood. Once again she felt that icy water grasping and tugging at her, felt the desperate struggle to keep hold of that white foal as the drowned black moved with the force of the water.

There, again, in the dark, with the barely visible circle of eyes staring at her, she knew that Yarra had to be hers. She could hardly see him, or the second foal, the darkness was so dense after the sheet lightning. But he was Yarralala, and he was there. Had not her milk spurted all over his head, binding him to her, at least for some months while he needed her life-giving milk, for that is the law for young of the wild.



### *Sheet after Sheet of Lightning, and the Horses were Gone*

Then it came: blazing sheet lightning, filling the small grassy corner between the river and the cascade, a long-continuing light. Every horse was afire, glowing, haloed. Coolawyn looked all around at the white horses. She felt Yarra put his head underneath her, then she realised that every one of the lovely white horses had its eyes shut, that they were backing away into the dark forest.

Yarra did not move. Sheet after sheet of lightning filled the sky and lit up the little triangle of sweet grass, and the horses were gone. She saw that beautiful stallion melting into the trees, saw him take one backward look and hastily shut his eyes against the brilliant light.

She moved away from Yarra and saw that his eyes were closed, too. As the light became brighter, his eyes screwed up.

There was not a white horse to be seen, but there was Brinda walking down the track towards them, wide-eyed and anxious.

Coolawyn hurried towards her, and Yarra followed, his nose against her flank so that, blinded by the glare or not, he could walk safely beside her. Coolawyn turned her head back to him. He must be told over and over again that he was safe with her, he would be protected by her.

She and Brinda rubbed their heads on each other's necks, and then the three of them headed up the track, to safety and their own herd, so when the lightning ceased briefly, Coolawyn, her white foal with the strange eyes, and Brinda, had all gone.

The horses who sought darkness were still there, in the trees.

Perhaps Yarra did not want to go: perhaps Coolawyn had a picture in her mind of a splendid stallion, cast in shining light, but there was a sort of quietness over the mountains. Nothing, except the pale grey mare, her pale grey half-sister, and the white foal, made any movement.

The sheet lightning came again, breaking up the quiet. Up, out of a deep, tea tree-filled gully off to the south side of the ridge, there rose a swirling cloud, and a faint, rushing sound. Coolawyn shied away from the sound, but in a moment the cloud covered the three of them.

Yarra screamed as he felt the cloud touch him with soft, moving wings. The sky darkened again, and they could only feel that the cloud was made of living things, bats or birds, and they were terrified. Then in another blaze of light, there

were half a hundred red eyes peering out of moth faces, as the soft wings, like great sheets of paperbark, nearly blinded them.

Then it was dark, and though the eyes were still there, they were not as bright, but the clouds of wings closed around them and drove them on and on, up the steep ridge.

The sky lit up again, and there were the myriad red eyes.

Yarra's eyes closed as the lightning flared, but as they closed Coolawyn caught a glimpse of eyes coloured like those of the moths, shining in the lightning.

Who was Yarra? She rubbed her head against his neck. This foal was hers.

The cloud of moths would not let them stop. They were being driven by the moths — driven by half a hundred burning red eyes that seemed to pierce their hides. Those moths knew some secret. Were they trying to drive the two greys and the white foal away from danger, away from something that may be bound to happen wherever they went?

Burra's herd would hold some sort of safety and certainty, when they rejoined them — if they found them. Coolawyn knew that she should never have left. Yarra knew he should never have followed the call of that white foal who was completely the same as himself.

The moths were driving them on, darkness enfolding them again.

Coolawyn nudged Yarra onwards and upwards. It was best to keep going and anyway, the moths would not let them stop.

From far below, and very faintly, there came a neigh.

Coolawyn knew it was calling her, and somehow a vision came into her mind of that small and secret hollow with its round, quiet pool, and the misty form of a stallion looking down at her.

Coolawyn threw a far-carrying neigh to the sky, to the dome of sky above the river and above the high mountains. It was Burra whose answer came through the night, and she called him again.

After a while there was a last dying rumble of thunder, and then the rain started. It was quiet, whispering rain to begin with, and the moths were still there, pushing them upwards through the alpine ash. But then the wind began.

First there was a sort of moan, and then the creaking as the hanging strips of bark on the tall trees swayed. Those eerie sounds became even more eerie when the moths gathered together into a dense cloud and seemed to vanish down the south side of the ridge. Moths with big, soft wings like paperbark would not survive such rain and wind.

The two greys and the white foal were there, alone, listening to the wind-swayed ribbons of bark. No soft wings fluttered over their backs, there were no

red eyes to frighten them and yet to be mysterious company. Nothing drove them on or upward and they were tired, so they stopped there amongst the creaking, sighing strips of bark, listening, too, to the moaning wind.

Yarra's flanks were heaving as he panted for breath after their long climb. He was almost unable to suck. Each one of them trembled with fear as a streamer of bark fell from one branch down to another, and then to the ground. Two boughs, nearby, were screeving together as the trees moved in the wind.

An owl, dislodged by a falling branch, fluttered and flew, alighting up above them. A giant glider peered out of a hollow in a tree trunk and then retreated. The wind blasted the long leaves, bruising them so that the strong eucalyptus scent flowed around them. A rat or a possum scuttled over the shaley track, near their hooves. A dingo howled in a deep hollow to the north. This was Coolawyn's land, and it was the land to which Yarra belonged, but tonight it was frightening.

Yarra pressed in close to her. The departure of the moths had left them exhausted and without the will to move.

Brinda was shivering. Her legs were sore. She had had to gallop through trees at night, forced to keep up with all the white horses, and her legs had been bruised and cut by rocks and fallen boughs. She was lame.

The wind wailed through the rocks high above the alpine ash, and the sound came blended with a distant trumpeting neigh. Then Coolawyn heard another sound. Someone ... something, had cut across through dense forest on to the ridge, just below them, and was coming quietly. It was not blundering, not creeping, just walking, perhaps hoping — walking through the darkness.

The wind was too strong to carry scent, but somehow Coolawyn knew that there was a stallion, an unknown stallion, and she was nervous. The bark streamers sighed and creaked, and there, with rain dripping off the long leaves onto their backs and the night pitch dark, she knew with absolute certainty that there was no space in all the great mountains for three stallions, all wanting her for their herds.

Then Burra's neigh sounded up above, and from below came a strange and thrilling neigh, for the white stallion was climbing fast through the darkness and the rain. The one cutting across the steep gullies towards the ridge, made no sound.

Coolawyn listened for a moment and then began to urge Yarra and Brinda upwards again. There would be safety with Burra, but there might be no way of stopping the three stallions meeting.

Coolawyn hurried her companions on, and she neighed once or twice as they went. When she heard the answer that came rising up from below, she did not

call again. That white stallion was so beautiful, but if he captured her, it would surely mean that she would have to run with the horses who galloped by night. She looked at Brinda. Brinda had not been really happy with that strange herd and her legs were badly hurt. Also, Coolawyn knew that the only horse she wanted to run with, all her life, was Burra.

The rain beat down, and she heard Burra call. His call came from much further down than from where his last call had come, but the white stallion's echoing neigh had sounded as though he had climbed a long way and was already much closer.

Coolawyn knew that the horses who galloped through the night were deeply feared by all the other brumbies. For one thing, they behaved so strangely; was it a madness? And the legend that when they were heard in the bush, a filly always vanished was undoubtedly true. Sometimes they died, becoming too lame to find food. Brinda had been stolen and she was dangerously lame.

Now, Coolawyn heard the fury in the call that Burra threw to the clouds and the rain. Then she heard him give another neigh, and this one was calling her ... 'Come to me, quickly, quickly.'

In the distance there was the sound of a horse racing downhill. Burra was coming to her with all speed. Coolawyn forgot the third stallion who was moving across the spurs and gullies, because the white stallion also called her and her alone, and he was coming closer and closer. She urged Yarra and Brinda onwards, quite desperately. She could tell that Brinda was frightened, and she, Coolawyn, had seen all the cuts on Brinda's legs which she had got when racing with the mob through the night.

Suddenly, just ahead of them, on the track, in deep darkness, she could make out the shape of a strange stallion standing waiting.

Coolawyn's heart seemed to miss a beat, jolted inside her pale grey chest. Yarra was shocked into stillness, and felt himself trembling all over, but Brinda cried out in fear.

The stallion simply stood, waiting, perhaps willing the mare and filly to come to him.

Brinda took some steps backwards, till she was behind Coolawyn. Then that wild neigh came from just below them. The strange stallion who was waiting rose on his hind legs, almost disappearing into the black clouds, the rain and the night.

Only for the presence of Yarra, pressed against her, Coolawyn would have galloped straight at him. Suddenly she decided that that was exactly what she had to do. She gathered herself together and sprang. The horse could not see her coming — not through the rain and the night. He did see a ghost of a white foal,

but he was nearly pushed over, off his feet, at the same moment as he shied with fear at the little ghost.

Burra had heard Coolawyn's neigh and also the neigh of the white stallion, drifting up through the tall trees from lower on the spur. The neigh of another stallion usually called up Burra's wild fighting spirit. Even he could tell that the call from below had an infinite attraction. It spoke longingly of far away forests of snow gums, and dark nights among high rock peaks. Burra knew that to a young mare it would say, 'Follow me. Ours will be the joy of the night sky, and the whispering trees, and the singing creeks that reflect the stars.' That neigh was offering all the mystery of the night.

Burra knew that he could offer the high country by day and by night, offer 'the glorious sun's life-giving rays', but somehow he knew — and Coolawyn knew, too — that the white stallion was king of the night.

No-one understood why the white herd were lords of the darkness — or why the brumbies of the night only came occasionally. This time the flood must have driven them to the higher areas. Everything was worrying, and Burra knew that Coolawyn had been restless ever since the flood. Were there dreams or were there questions that kept troubling her? Surely there was a tragedy. Where was the black foal whom she had borne?

Burra himself was always uneasy about the memory of that red eye, or red star, that had seemed to stare at him through the prostanthera bushes, down by the flooded river ... all this flashed through Burra's mind as he went crashing down the spur, neighing to Coolawyn as he went.

He knew, as he raced, that it was a brumby of the night who had called to Coolawyn, so he kept neighing urgently himself, telling her he was coming, and in no way must she answer the other call, and not possibly go back down the rugged track.

Then Burra was confronting the stranger stallion, whom he did not know had cut across the gullies and, there, immediately, was the white stallion too; three stallions, and the mare, the filly, and the white foal.

There they were: three stallions on the steep ridge in the rain, and the tall alpine ash sighing in the wild wind.

### *The Gentle Grey Mare Became a Virago*

Rain began to beat more wildly. Thunder rumbled again. Clouds pressed down lower, folding round tree, and bush, and horses — black clouds making thick black darkness. Burra knew that Coolawyn and the foal, and Brinda, were to one side; he could barely see even the ghostly white stallion who had come up the ridge.

That white horse stopped for one instant. It must have been shocked to find a second stallion there, on the ridge — he would have to defeat two stallions. It would be quite a battle, even for a horse that had an advantage in the dark.

Burra was shocked, too.

The white stallion hurled himself forward, straight for Burra, and Burra only saw him charge at the very last moment, for the cloud was so thick and dark.

Through that cloud, the third horse came into the fight with flailing legs.

A great blast of wind drove them into a heap together. There was the cracking of branches, and a huge rumbling of thunder. The weather truce was entirely broken and three stallions were battling in the dark, in the roaring wind, and rumbling thunder.

Lightning began to flicker. The white stallion seemed to become more desperate. A scream from an owl made Coolawyn jump with fright, and she took Yarra and Brinda a few yards further up the hill, out of the way of the almost invisible, snorting, rearing, striking horses.

Even when the weird scene was momentarily lit up by lightning, Coolawyn could not tell who was likely to win.

Burra seemed to be trying to drive off the big stranger, but it was Burra whom the white stallion was determined to defeat.

Burra shook him off furiously, but all that action was invisible in the pitch darkness. The wind came raging over the heights above them.

The stranger stallion was knocked off balance, and Burra sprang at him, just as that white horse launched himself at Burra. The double weight sent the stranger horse slithering down the side of the ridge. The white stallion was quick and nimble on his feet. He swung in to attack Burra, who was a few feet further down the side of the ridge, on steep and slippery ground. The big stranger was still crashing and scrambling down below him. Burra had to struggle to keep his foothold and his balance, struggle not to slide after him. The white stallion's

attack was almost too much, but he pushed himself backwards and the white stallion's striking hoof only slid off his shoulder.

They both recovered balance on the track.

It was then that Coolawyn could see them both, for the sky was momentarily filled with sheet lightning again. The white stallion was rearing up to strike with both forefeet, but in the glare his eyes shut, and he dropped down without striking.

The lightning faded away: the sky was black again, and after the vivid light, the night seemed darker than ever. Coolawyn could not see them at all — just hear the snorting and thumping and muffled squeals. As her eyes got more accustomed to the dark, she could just make out the two fighting horses, and could tell that the white stallion seemed to have the advantage. The stranger stallion had not climbed back on to the ridge.

Thunder rumbled louder and deeper, and from a large area of sky. It sounded like a warning.

The white stallion attacked Burra with feverish intensity, almost as if time were short, as though he knew that that warning was for him. Then light blazed all over the sky; every tree seemed afire. The two horses were clear for Coolawyn to see.

The white stallion's eyes closed, and he simply stood ... quite still.

Burra looked at him in huge surprise, then he just pushed him to one side, called Coolawyn, and walked up the brilliantly lit track. Coolawyn, Yarra and Brinda followed.

Coolawyn looked back once or twice, but the white stallion had backed into a tree's shadow, and as the thunder rumbled, lightning lit up the whole mountain world.

Coolawyn and the white foal and Brinda walked up the track, and Burra came in behind them. Each one of them, except Yarra, listened for any sound that would tell that they were being followed. Occasionally when the lightning subsided, briefly, and there was darkness, a horse could be heard. That sound would stop when there was warning thunder and when the sky became a dome of light.

Burra and Coolawyn both realised that those times were when the white stallion stood still, then they, in turn, hurried on. Coolawyn, Yarra and Brinda, especially the foal, were all very tired by the time they reached the belt of snow gums at the top of the spur. Burra went ahead then, through the limbs that were lashing in the wind and blocking the track.

Coolawyn knew that Yarra was totally exhausted and she kept watching him and in close contact. Even so, she did not miss him for a second, when a

particularly strong blast of wind lashed branches across her face. Then he had gone. Coolawyn stopped immediately, fear almost choking her. She began looking all around, behind her, and called softly. There was no answer, and the wind carried away any scent.

Burra searched too. He was annoyed. He should be back with his herd. He began to get impatient. For some time he had felt that this foal had brought the brumbies of the night. He could not help feeling that they would be well rid of him, but he knew that Coolawyn would not leave him, and, if she stayed alone, searching ... the stallion, king of the night, would assuredly find her, and steal her, force her to go with him.

Coolawyn kept on searching, but Yarra had slid beneath an alpine grevillea, and a network of fallen branches, and he was so sound asleep that he did not hear her.

Coolawyn became quite desperate. She had fought so hard to pull that foal out of the raging flood and nothing must take him from her. She kept on looking and the wind blew harder.

When Burra tried to take her away to join his herd she would not go, and Brinda stayed with her looking for that white foal.

Piccaninny dawn came and the wind dropped. Coolawyn stood quite still, tired out. Then she heard a sound and there suddenly, and seeming to be enormous, was the white stallion. He started to dig at some of the fallen branches.

Coolawyn froze.

A terrified cry came from beneath the branches.

Yarra! It was undoubtedly Yarra, though Coolawyn could not see him. He had to be somewhere near the feet of the white stallion. She raced forward, calling her foal, calling Burra as she went.

She saw the white stallion raking the fallen branches apart, heard Yarra screaming, and there she was in a second, her teeth bared, her ears laid back. Yarra raised his head out of the fallen branches. The stallion made a grab at his neck.

Quick as the lightning that had always stopped the stallion in his tracks, Coolawyn leapt through the branches and leaves, knocking the stallion's head out of the way. There she was, standing over her foal, protecting him.

She stood with her hooves planted four square about the foal. Even though she had thought that stallion extraordinarily beautiful, he had menaced her foal. She bared her teeth at him, and snaked her neck like a stallion would, threatening the big white horse with all the ferocity she knew.

The white horse was startled to see the gentle, pale grey mare turn into such



a virago, and he stepped back a little way. There they stood, staring at each other, the menace in the attitude of the white stallion slowly fading away, and Coolawyn standing firm, but a little less aggressive, though she was still held in the grip of fear and horror.

Piccaninny dawn ... a soft grey light ... For the first time, Coolawyn could see that magnificent stallion's head quite clearly, see that his eyes were the same unusual colour as Yarra's — as though the sunset had touched them.

He was looking at her with a kind of respect.

Her lips relaxed over her bared teeth, but she tossed her head in a fierce gesture of dismissal. Yarra had to be protected ... Yarra was the most important thing in her life.

Then, through the trees, she saw that mare with the other foal who was exactly like Yarra. They must have followed all the way. Coolawyn knew she must out-stare the stallion and force him to go back to the white mare, get rid of him, but perhaps the mare and foal were not even real ... she was so tired, so worried. The beautiful stallion must go, and let her take Yarra through the snow gums to the Cascade valley. Then all would be well. A sort of peace would come, the peace that had never been since the flood.

Thunder was rumbling round, warning again, and some big drops of rain fell.

Coolawyn did not move — simply stood over the foal. The foal she was carrying stirred within her as lightning filled the sky, and she saw the stallion close his eyes, saw him back slowly through the tangled snow-gum limbs. Far, far below a mare called.

The real dawn took a long time coming. Yarra slept, exhausted. Down the spur, as light filtered through the polished trunks and limbs of the snow gums, that other white foal could no longer move he was so tired, and he dropped to the ground and slept, too.

The rumbling thunder and the sheet lightning were all part of the forces of life and death.

The white stallion could not force the white mare and the second exhausted foal to move, and he was bothered by that mare's call from below. He should be with his herd. He was thinking, too, of a pale grey mare standing over the foal that seemed, in his memory, to be part of the raging flood. If only there had not been that flood, there would be no disturbing memories. Life had gone wrong.

Sheet lightning filled the sky again. Both stallion and white mare closed their eyes. Far below, that mare called again. The white stallion knew he should go to his herd, and just then he heard a blundering noise down the track and he remembered the big, stranger stallion. What if he made downwards and tried to steal a lovely white filly?

Way up in the entangled, wind-tossed snow gums, Coolawyn stood over the sleeping Yarra.

For Coolawyn, even though she was still afraid that the white mare would steal Yarra, and afraid that the stallion might kill him, there was somewhere a memory of a vision enfolded in the wind and the rain of a beautiful white horse below the towering alpine ash.

### *Other Eyes Did See Burra*

The rain stopped just when the white stallion and his mare and foal were level with the gully where the red-eyed moths lived. A cloud of moths with big wings like paperbark closed in behind them. When daylight came, their eyes would not seem so bright. There was the same fluttering of wings as had driven Coolawyn, Brinda and Yarra up the track. This time the moths were urging the white stallion with the sunset-touched eyes downwards and back to his herd.

The whisper of the wings seemed to murmur a warning. The warning was not loud, and it was not a warning of brilliant, blinding light.

The white stallion stopped for a second because he felt sure that the fluttering wings had muffled a sound that came from far below. His unusually acute hearing had heard the sound of a horse blundering its way down the spur, and also the far away call of a mare. He had to hurry. There had been that strange stallion when he and Burra had met together. Was he now going down the track to steal a filly from the white brumby's herd? It was something that had never happened. The moths kept touching his rump. Hurry! Hurry!

There were no wind-whispered stories in the bush of a brumby of the night ever having fought with another. The legends only told of the gallopers by night being heard very occasionally, and that when they came they always stole a filly. It was possible that Brinda was the only captured filly who had ever come back, and she was very lame.

Why had the sound of their galloping hooves in the dark struck fear in the brumby herds? Why had no one ever retaliated by even wanting to steal a filly from the night brumby herd?

Burra was half-asleep on his feet, and he was suddenly wondering if there might be more than one herd that galloped by night? Why were they never seen in daytime? And there were more questions bothering him. Why had Yarra been so keen to follow that other white foal? Why had the bright lightning made that white stallion back off? He was certainly not afraid of fighting.

Daylight came, and there was nothing unusual — nothing amiss. They could all relax.

For days they grazed peacefully, seeming to forget that sinister thundering of galloping hooves that had come in the night. Only Burra and Yarra were restless.

Burra knew it was time to find out the truth, and to drive that white herd so far away that they would never come back. It was possible that they had gone for ever, now the flood had subsided. Burra did not know why he was impelled to go to find them, but something forced him to go. Surely the only answer was to drive the herd far away.

So, one morning, before the robin sang his early song in the black sallee tree, Burra was gone.

The band of snow gums was still shadowed with darkness, but occasionally the shadows moved with a stir of air, as though some unseen horse had brushed by. Back in the Cascade Valley, a plover called its sad dirge for times past and for ancient ghosts.

Burra jumped each time a branch moved. His skin was creeping; a leaf, touching his rump, made him spring forward.

Something was ahead. Was it only a shadow moving in the dawn wind? Whisper of air sliding through branches, whisper of ancient happenings and things still to come. The plover cried again, and for a moment Burra thought he saw a grey stallion, fierce and intractable, barring his way, but it was only a dream, and it was only a dream that a silver stallion was gliding down the aisles of mountain ash on ahead.

Who were these horses who had lived here once, and were ghosts going so proudly through the great trees? Perhaps it was only his dreams that brought them back. Who was he, Burra? Was he only a ghost searching for another ghost or a dream? Why did that white stallion close his eyes and stand quite still when the sky was alight? And what was it that stopped him, Burra, from fighting him when he stood defenceless? What was the power possessed by that horse?

Dawn light began to filter in between the great trees, slanting through the rough trunks; the spectral horses grew fainter. The bark stripping from high branches creaked in the dawn wind. Soon sunlight would filter in bars between the tree trunks. Soon there would be warmth on Burra's grey coat.

He felt the strength of the dawn taking possession of him; warmth and light coming down the corridors of mountain ash, and he drew unto himself some of the great strength of those huge trees and of the hundreds of years in which they had stood, guardians of the steep slopes.

Horses and cattle had gone down that track, year after year, till the cattle never came to the mountains again, but there were no white horses of which Burra might catch even a glimpse.

It was then that Burra, trotting down the wide aisles, beneath the tall, sighing trees, remembered that strange red eye, or red star, that had stared out of the mint bushes, that night of the flood.

Who was the white stallion — who was he? And why was he, Burra, searching for a white stallion who closed his eyes when the lightning flashed? But the white stallion certainly posed a danger to Coolawyn.

Burra went on down the track with swinging strides. Now that he had made up his mind to drive that white stallion away, far away for ever, he felt pleased and happy. Once he had found the midnight gallopers and driven them away down the river, there would be nothing more to worry about — although, there was that white foal that Coolawyn had brought back to the herd, after the flood ...

Into the back of his mind, as he neared the gully out of which the moths had come, arose another picture, and this one was of a white mare who had a white foal, one that was exactly like Yarra, so alike that he had indeed thought it was Coolawyn's foal of the flood.

Brilliant sunlight was glinting on every shining leaf, when Burra reached the foot of the spur. There was no sign of the gallopers by night. Where did he expect to find them? Why did he expect to find them?

Burra walked across the grassy clearing to the bank of Cascade Creek, where it rushed to join the Indi River. He should cross that deep, extremely swift and boulder-filled creek and see if the white horses were somewhere on the other side. He found himself thinking that they were bound to be sheltering among trees.

He walked up and down the stretch of creek, seeking a place to cross. Then he went in, scrabbling over rocks, splashing into deeper pools — great grey horse forcing his way across, and the spray around him was a shining cloud on this wonderful, glittering morning.

Perhaps it was not a day for brumbies who galloped in the darkness of the night to be found, but Burra, grey and handsome and full of strength, did not think of that.

He clambered out the other side of the creek, and shook the water out of his coat, till he was haloed around with a million faceted diamonds. Almost as though he was aware of his beauty, he stood for a moment, poised on tiptoes, with all the future his. Had Coolawyn seen him then, she would have seen that a mantle of power and strength had descended on him from the sunlight and the life-giving glory of the sun.

He was suddenly feeling a longing for his herd, a longing to be back with them, but first he had to frighten that white stallion and his herd so that they never came back to the Ingegoodbee Valley, Burra's bumble. Burra knew that he was too great a stallion to hurt that white horse from whom emanated some sort of magnetic power. There was no need to do anything more than let him know

that he was never to come near again, never to steal a filly ... or mare.

The white horses with the strange eyes were nowhere to be seen.

Burra searched all day, to and fro through miles of forest, until he began to feel they must have returned to their own country, and that they would not be coming thieving fillies any more.

He leapt around with happiness in the late afternoon sunlight. Low, slanting sunbeams penetrated the forest, but Burra did not see because he was playing and dancing in the brilliant sunshafts.

Hidden from penetrating light, other eyes did see Burra.

## *The White Herd's Drumming Hooves*

In the last light, Burra hurried back to find his herd. As darkness crept up from the floor of the forest, tall, white ribbon gums became slim ghosts and then faded.

The bush sounds began stealthily; whispering and murmuring as the daytime sleepers stirred to life with the setting of the sun. Red eyes, green eyes that could gleam in starlight were eagerly regarding the new night. Each night was a renewal of life, and something exciting might come their way.

Possums rustled among long, narrow leaves; a mopoke called; rats and mice snuffled across the forest floor. Echidnas poked their long, sensitive noses into ant heaps now that the ants had gone to bed, even though they had foraged during the daytime. Wombats moved ponderously, inspecting tucker; 'roos and wallabies hopped quietly through the trees.

A white stallion shook himself and stretched every muscle. The mopoke called again, and the denizens of the dark forest started to life for the night.

There was a restless white mare and her white foal, moving about at the foot of the track up the spur. The stars appeared, one by one, in the sky and faintly glowed, barely illuminating the track that led to 'the tops'.

The whole night was waiting for the white herd. For the white foal, at the foot of the track, there was this magical night, and no one to tell him not to disturb any sleepers. There was star-glow, and there were dreams, dreams and desires calling him, calling them all.

The wind sighed through the ribbon gums.

The river sang over pebbles and boulders.

Whispering wind and singing stream, star-glow and old, old stories, all drifted around the beautiful herd of white horses. Only some of them had the ears to hear those ancient stories that were in the whisper of the wind and the rustle of leaves.

High above, in the wide valley of the Cascades, stars and their reflections twinkled and shone at each other, the reflections becoming streaks of light in the swift waters of the creek. Burra and his herd lay sleeping, or were asleep on their feet, secure and at peace: Burra was back, all manner of things was well.

The white horses made very little sound as they climbed up the spur. The faintly moving strips of bark on the alpine ash were almost silent that night, for there was no wind to sway them. The night wore on, and the stars grew brighter.

Even Coolawyn was sleeping, now that Burra was home.

A mopoke called.

Suddenly she woke. A sound? Was it distant thunder? There were very few clouds this night. Indeed, it was a season full of thunder, but surely not tonight.

Far down the valley where the creek turned down between hills ... were there horses?

Burra woke, too. He came and stood beside her.

She was on her feet now, and Yarra also was disturbed.

Ghostly horses ... insubstantial ... but those thudding hooves? What could be happening? They were getting closer. They must be real ... the midnight gallopers ... the midnight gallopers. Coolawyn felt a stab of fear, then throbbing, wild excitement. Yarra felt his skin prickling.

Did the stars shine brighter?

In star-glow, those shadow horses were only ghosts, but somehow both Coolawyn and Burra realised that the stallion had come up from the rear of his herd and was leading them. They were getting closer.

Quickly Burra gathered his herd together, getting them like a fence around Coolawyn whom he watched all the time. Coolawyn could not bear to be hidden in the middle of the herd. All of a sudden, she wanted to see what was happening — to be able to see and to be seen — if it was possible for any one of them to see anything.

In this clear, open valley, the white herd was not galloping through trees and over logs ... anyone who went with them might not be hurt ... what would it be like to run with them? Coolawyn could feel a current of excitement flowing through her, as if she were galloping through the night beside that white stallion.

The white herd's galloping, drumming beat became louder till the throb of it seemed to fill the air, and was drumming in Coolawyn's ears. Then, without warning, there was a rushing, breathing, sweating mob all around and among them, ghostly, almost invisible — stallion, mares, foals, two year olds, yearlings. Burra had leapt out to meet them, trying to force them to change direction.

Quickly, quickly, everything was happening ... the stallion trying to cut Coolawyn out of her own herd, Yarra dashing from her side to find that other foal, who really had to be among the gallopers, then desperately trying to find Coolawyn again, for, even though he felt that he and that other foal belonged together, Coolawyn meant all love to him.

All was a confusion of horses in the darkness — two herds, the greys almost



invisible in the night, and the whites showing up spectrally in the starlight. Mares were calling their foals. Yarra was still torn between that other foal and Coolawyn, and she was searching wildly for Yarra, and all the time the white stallion was trying to force her away from the herd.

Burra sprang out of the night at that white stallion and took that horse's whole attention, making him leave Coolawyn alone.

Coolawyn could only think of finding Yarra, and there was that other mare kicking and biting at her, trying to take Yarra as well as her own foal, and Yarra racing indecisively between Coolawyn and the other foal ... or calling it away from its mother.

That white stallion did not shut his eyes and simply stand still, as he had done on the night of the thunder and lightning. Burra found that he could not drive him away, not easily as he had expected. That white horse did not go, and he gave Burra some very hard blows.

In that night, faintly lit by star-glow, Burra and the white stallion were very evenly matched. The disturbing element in their struggle was Coolawyn and her foal, and the other mare and the foal that was so like Yarra. The foals were under foot, at first, and then they went off while the two mares kicked and bit each other, and called their young. Then the stallions could see the mares trying to take a foal each and get away from the battle, but the foals refused to be parted. The white mare then tried again to take them both, and Coolawyn became desperate.

Both stallions lost concentration on the fight. Both rushed after Coolawyn. Burra became very angry — Coolawyn was his favourite mare. He began to realise that the white stallion was trying to drive both mares and their foals down the valley. He crashed into the white horse and got around the mares, himself, calling to Coolawyn as he galloped.

A faint lightning had come to the sky in the east — a rift between advancing clouds. Dawn would come, and the weather was changing. Burra knew by the rising hair of his coat, by the tingling of soft hairs in his ears, by something inside himself, that wild wind, and perhaps thunder, were coming. There had been so much thunder this summer, and thunder made the world dangerous.

Suddenly, he stopped trying to fight the galloping white stallion, and simply swung around Coolawyn, blowing through his nostrils, ordering her to come with him.

She gave a maddened kick at the white mare and then stopped dodging and attacking. It was Yarra who took her away again, and that other foal with him. This time Burra followed, went around them, and he neighed to Coolawyn — to Coolawyn alone.

The other mare made her foal follow her and she strode off in a dignified way, towards the white stallion.

Coolawyn watched the other foal, called Yarra to come back to her, and quickly checked him over to be sure he was hers. For one moment, the foal that had walked away in the faintly lightening night had given her a sudden stab of fear. Was Yarra going off with that white mare?

She smelt the foal who was pressed against her. It was unmistakably Yarra.

Burra's nose touched her ears softly. A darkling dawn was coming, and in that faint light, those white horses could have been a dream ... had never really been there ... only phantoms.

All the clouds had come; it became a very sombre dawn, dark with thunderclouds — so heavily clouded that the rising sun was completely obscured.

A pair of plovers, down by the creek, cried and flew up towards the sky.

Coolawyn shivered. The threnody of the plovers only told of sadness that was yet to come.

Though the white horses may have brought great excitement into life — too much excitement — tragedy seemed to be lurking, too. Tragedy seemed always to be close. Exciting and yet fearful: it was like the dark and the light, night and day.

## *The Foal of His Dreams*

As the warmer, lazier days of midsummer came, life for Burra's herd became more peaceful, in spite of the fact that there were often thunderstorms. Burra took his herd back to the Ingegoodbee Valley after a while, because everything was so undisturbed. There was no sound of the gallopers by night.

Coolawyn's only worry was that Yarra loved to wander by night, and was always restless. She knew he would leave sometime — foals left their mothers about the time they became yearlings, but he should not leave yet, still needing his mother's milk and nowhere near a year old. Most often the yearlings ran with the herd till they were another year older.

Yarra seemed to slip away from her side, without really seeming to move, as though taken away by an eddy of air, called by a dream. Usually she found him quickly; he was always searching for something, and would seem quite bewildered.

Sometimes Burra heard her go and he would follow, feeling strongly that Yarra would bring trouble to the herd.

Then one night, after finding nothing night after night, something was there — not galloping, but creeping silently — almost unheard footfalls, as gentle as a drifting mist.

Yarra knew there was someone, and quite some distance away. He got up, stretched his muscles, then touched his sleeping mother with his nose — softly so that he would not wake her — and went silently into the night. He set down each hoof with care, knowing that he must be as silent as that other white foal, whom he was sure he would find. He went on, listening, feeling, climbing upwards.

At last he was quite certain that the other foal was coming towards him.

Even with his breathless, silent creeping, he disturbed an owl. It seemed almost to drop from a tall snow gum, and its fine-feathered wings gently brushed Yarra's ears with only the faintest whispering sound.

Yarra paused for a moment. He knew well the heavy wingbeat of a currawong, knew the sound of an ibis in flight, the whirr of a mountain lowrie, even the flailing, enormous sound made by the wings of a black swan. This owl went with silent flight, and yet touched his ears with something of the night. Yarra stood still for a few seconds; the owl had given him a barely

understandable secret. He went on, with sudden certainty speeding his steps.

‘Mopoke, mopoke’ sounded, soft and thrilling — the voice of the bird of the night, the bird of all wisdom, all secrets.

Yarra dropped down off the timbered ridge dividing the head of the Ingegoodbee and the Tin Mine Creek, then walked down the gentle valley where, very soon, the golden podolepis would be flowering. Something moved. Yarra called and there was an answer. In a moment, would the secret unfold still further? That other foal would be with him.

A strange, fluid picture rose up in his mind — a picture of that foal, much smaller, younger, but that same foal, scrambling up the riverbank, slipping back, almost drowning, water all over it, water streaming off it. The white mare was in the picture, too, being swept by the stream into an overhanging branch. That was all. The picture faded away then: there was only freezing, swirling water, carrying *him*.

Quick, in the starlight ... there was that foal now ... that foal whom he had seen in the still, small pool ... the same foal, but bigger, older ... the foal with whom he had galloped when the two herds clashed together.

Yarra was bemused by the pictures that had flashed up into his memory. The wild river faded into a vision of a small hollow encircled by ribbon gums and candlebarks, and he saw and felt his own desperate search for the foal whom he saw in the still, small pool.

Now he kept walking slowly towards that other foal. One white leg after the other, slowly, towards the other foal, and that foal was walking slowly, too, one white leg after the other, slowly, slowly. Yarra knew now that it was the foal of his dreams, but real.

Months had passed since the flood caused by the too-swift melting of the snow, and in that time, the foals had grown. In the warm days podolepis would flower, like a hundred suns all down the gentle valley. Time would roll on.

This darkness would turn to daylight soon, then night would come again. Over and over throughout the summer, thunder might come and lightning blaze. The flowers of the mountains would fade, grey days come and then the great white flakes would fall like petals from the sky; more and more snow till spring came, the time of the snow melt and perhaps another flood. Yarra and all the last spring’s foals — this other white foal, too — would grow and more foals would be born as the wattles were flowering, and the alpine grevilleas scented the air.

There must come this future spring when more foals would be born, and lie in the snowgrass beside their mothers, but a whole winter of snow, and ice, and wind was between.

The two white foals were close enough to touch nose to nose. The owl flew

silently out of the trees that lined the valley. The secret was unfolding, and yet in no way explained. The remembered roar of the flood was in both foals' ears, filling the quiet night.

And the night was no longer quiet, because there was the sound of movement — of trotting hooves — from somewhere behind Yarra, and then more movement from the far end of the valley, where the white mother was seeking her foal, just as Coolawyn had followed Yarra's wandering. Coolawyn, coming over the divide, was not alone.

Two horses were coming, just as the moon rose above the timbered hills.

Yarra tried to look in the direction from which the two lots of footfalls had come, but the light of the moon shone directly at him. He half-closed his eyes against the brilliance. Through his eyelashes, he saw Coolawyn, and he saw Burra following her.

He took a step right up against the foal, rubbing his head against the other foal's, realising that the scent was very similar to his own scent, noticing that the foal's eyes were half-shut, too. Then he saw, over that white rump, the white mare coming — hurrying along the open valley.

A wisp of cloud drifted across the moon, dimming its brilliance, and in that brief moment Yarra saw that his mother, coming towards him, had started to move more slowly, as though uncertain as to what she should do.

Burra looked in no way indecisive, then all at once he looked confused.

The cloud slid away from the face of the moon. The wide valley bordered by snow gums became black and white. Yarra's eyes flickered half-shut again, and he put his head over the white neck of the other foal. With his eyes turned away from the blinding shaft of moonlight, he could see that white mare coming towards them even faster. Agitation was in every movement of her body. Obviously she knew that Coolawyn and Burra were coming. Obviously she was frightened of losing her foal.

Yarra was frightened, too. That mare might try to take him. Who was he, Yarra? Who was this other foal whom he had sought ever since the flood — the one whom he had always been beside?

The owl flew over with faintly whispering wings.

Burra stopped, but seemed to make up his mind that there was only one answer to this extraordinary dilemma, and one only. He began to canter carefully through the moon-shadows and beams of light. Round the white mare he went — beautiful grey stallion, bathed in moonlight.

There was no way that he, Burra, would stand any nonsense. He knew that Yarra totally differed from the other foals, had disrupted the herd; he knew that this white mare and her foal had already been a nuisance, but he would see that

all the wandering away from the other mares and foals would end. Coolawyn was his favourite mare, and he would not allow her foal, or anyone else's, to take her away from him.

He began to drive the white mare up to the group — her own foal, Coolawyn and Yarra, and he called Coolawyn gently. Her gentle answer came. Just then the white mare burst into a furious gallop, and she charged the little group, calling her foal.

Burra rounded them all up and began to drive them into the valley.

The owl was silhouetted against the moonlight, on the branch of a ribbon gum. He was watching everything, and now he called, 'Mopoke, mopoke.'

Yarra listened, Coolawyn listened. Burra heard, but nothing was going to make him change his mind. If he collected this white mare and foal into his own herd, Yarra's wandering should stop, and Coolawyn should be happy again, as though there had never been that vast flood. He would take his herd up into the head of the Crackenback River where there were fewer trees ... stay higher up in the mountains till snow came.

'Mopoke, mopoke' came through the night, and this time the sound was sad.

Burra pushed his two mares and their foals onwards, but there was something wrong. The foals ran shoulder-to-shoulder, but the mares were snapping and kicking at each other. It was as though each one were desperately afraid.

Perhaps this would not be an answer to the problem. Perhaps Coolawyn was always going to be upset by this white mare and this foal who was the exact copy of Yarra.

Above them still, the mopoke called his words of love.

Burra's annoyance had faded away, leaving him with some absolute knowledge in his bones and veins, and his tingling nerves. He knew that Coolawyn must be made safe from that white stallion and Coolawyn was the most important thing in his life.

He had to take his herd, with the two odd white foals and the white mare, to the high country where surely the night gallopers never came.

## *Snow Floating Down Through the Dark Night*

All that summer the mountains echoed with the rolling and crashing of thunder, many more thunderstorms than usual. Sometimes they were storms without rain, and occasionally bushfires were started by lightning, for the forest country had become very dry.

Burra had moved his herd up on to the Brindle Bull, feeling that it was better to be higher in the mountains. That white herd, the night gallopers, never went very high. If only he had not taken that white mare and her foal ... She and her foal, and the thunder and lightning, had upset the herd. It was not being a peaceful summer.

The white mare was very aggressive. At best, her kicking and biting at Coolawyn had made Coolawyn stay closer to him. It was not just the white mare who caused trouble. Those two foals would not be separated.

Each mare would have taken the other foal, while desperately keeping her own.

In a strange way, Burra felt sorry for the white mare. He realised that she was trying to get back to her herd, but every time she got the foal away with her, it turned back to Yarra, and she would keep calling. Once Yarra went quite a distance down a long snowgrass lane that ran between rocks, but Coolawyn neighed and neighed in misery, and went after them, bringing Yarra back, so that the other foal came back too, with the white mare following.

Burra would have let the white mare and her foal go, but for Yarra and Coolawyn ... Coolawyn was more important than anything.

The two white foals and the sad white mare created a frightening feeling that something quite inescapable was going to happen.

Sometimes Burra was sure he heard a distant neighing in the night. The darker the night, the closer the neigh sounded, and the more upset the white mare became. The herd could not rest, and it seemed that insubstantial wraiths slid between rocks — phantoms or memories called up by the sounds, and by a desperate longing for something that no longer existed. The mountains seemed full of mysterious beings.

Then, on the night in which the neighs were very close, the white mare answered, and after her call had echoed round and round the rocks of Paddy Rush's Bogong, there was a deathly silence.

Burra kept rounding up the white mare and the two foals, so she could not escape.

The night grew colder and colder. Burra was hot from constantly trotting or cantering, but he felt the leaden cold on his grey coat. Sweat broke under his silver-grey mane, and the still air, pressing down, told him that something was going to happen. He should be moving his herd down lower, to the Cascades, or even to the Ingegoodbee, but surely these gallopers by night, who would steal Coolawyn, were waiting between them and a safe place for his mares.

Something very cold landed on his hot back, then came a feather-light touch on his nostril. Burra tossed his head. Drifting, floating down through the dark night came snow ... snow ... snow.

The world would be changed — all sound deadened, all growth stilled for the time of short days and long, long nights. If the sun shone, there would be absolute brilliance reflected off the white mountains.

Now or never, now or never. The white stallion, near the head of the Crackenback River, began to hurry and his herd followed him, only the three young colts keeping up to him.

Winter ...

Before the bright white snow covered the land thickly, the mare must be brought back to his herd, the grey mare taken, and they must go, then, back to the safety of the low country where they belonged.

Snow touched ears, noses, backs, withers. Snow would soon mat eyelashes, touch eyelids. They hurried on through the falling flakes.

Burra and Coolawyn both knew in their deepest selves that tonight was the night. It was now or never for the white, night gallopers, but surely they would never come as high as this.

The white stallion had known it even before a flake of snow touched his eyelids, but that icy touch reminded him that, though winter often held dark days — days when, like the wombats, they could graze and find food — the snow reflected a blinding glare in which he and his herd could be entirely lost ... and could die.

They must hurry. None of them had ever been on Paddy Rush's Bogong, none of them had ever been so high in the mountains. It was not as though the rocks and ridges, valleys and hollows were drawn on that stallion's mind, like a map. He would just have to head in the direction in which his instinct told him that his mare and her foal were to be found.

Occasionally he neighed to call her. She only answered once.



There was also that beautiful grey mare to be captured, if possible, but now, with the winter's snow beginning, the real importance was to take his own mare and her foal back to their own bingle.

Both Burra and Coolawyn heard his call, and the white mare stopped biting and kicking at Coolawyn, and sent her one answer. Her answering neigh caused the already nervous herd to fly apart again. They went in all directions, dashing through the snow-filled night.

Presently they came back to Burra and to the two mares and their foals whom he had kept together with him. All the mares and foals, all the yearlings, were jumpy — a current of fear running through them all — and the cold snowflakes seemed to touch bare nerves.

Burra stopped his cantering around and around for a fleeting moment, and listened intently. There was utter silence. Could that white herd be climbing up and be going to hurtle through rocks and over an edge in amongst them?

Then it started. A wild cacophony of neighs echoed off rocks and off the dark and heavy clouds, and the snow began to fall more steadily. The young colts and yearlings came hurtling with the stallion — a wave of almost invisible horses. They neighed and neighed to the wild sky and the falling flakes. Time and space; the snowgrass lanes and hollows between heaps of rocks; everything seemed filled with horses and their mad neighs, with their leaping bodies, with all the bucking, kicking, rearing white horses, the invaders who could see more than could the grey ones.

Burra did not mind if the white mare was recaptured, but there was the problem of her foal and the attachment between it and Yarra. Undoubtedly, Coolawyn would do what Yarra did.

Burra flung himself at the white stallion, but, while they struggled together, some of the yearling colts were driving Coolawyn and the white mare away, collecting up the two foals, and vanishing into the dark and the falling snow.

Burra landed a resounding whack on the side of the white stallion's head, though being barely able to see even his outline, and he took off after the departing colts and the mares.

Coolawyn was already evading them and making a strong effort to hurry back to Burra.

For one instant, the white stallion stood out in the strange snow-glow, before darkness enfolded him. Coolawyn saw and knew that he was beautiful, but knew, too, that Burra had something which he did not have — and she belonged to Burra.

A wind was making the falling flakes into a maelstrom. Coolawyn shook the

snow out of her eyes, dodged the colts in a frenzied rush, and called Yarra as she went. She knew where Burra was, even though she could barely see his shadowed shape in the night and the thick-falling flakes.

She felt Yarra close at her side, in the mix-up of half-seen, half-felt, half-heard shapes and sounds of horses. There was a beat of snowflakes in her eyes. The other mare might go, the other foal, too, in the unreal night. Something was telling her that Burra was as strong as the grey rocks of Paddy Rush's Bogong, that he was as strong as bright beams of sunlight. Sunlight should soon dispel this weird night of phantom horses galloping in the dark.

Then a great blast of wind laden with twisting, whirling snowflakes picked up Yarra and carried him for several feet. It spun Coolawyn round, and drove her uncontrollably. She was rocking on her feet, quite unable to stand still and quite disorientated. She had no idea which way she was going or if she was just being carried hither and thither by the wind. She struggled to keep upright.

She gasped out a neigh for Yarra and heard what she was sure was a muffled answer from somewhere, and tried to battle towards it — stumbling, rocking with the strength of the blizzard.

There was a lull, and she was leaning so hard across the wind that when it was quiet, for a second, she fell to her knees. Something loomed close by and she struggled up to it. It was a dark solid rock against which she could shelter, if only she could find Yarra.

The other horses seemed to have faded right away into the clouds of spindrift snow. She did not know where they were — or where she was, either.

Coolawyn did know that there were snow gums almost closing both ends of this valley. In that tearing wind she could not be sure if she was going uphill or downhill. She kept calling Yarra. Suddenly, and with intense relief, she felt him at her side, and they sheltered together by the rock. All around them, the snow swirled in a twisting cloud.

Yarra pressed against her, but he kept calling. After all these months, Coolawyn knew that he was calling the other foal, realised that it was the other foal for whom he had always searched.

Something seemed lifted by the wind and dropped in a collapsed heap at Coolawyn's feet. The other foal ...

The rock gave little shelter — it was only something firm to stop them being blown apart from each other.

Presently, Yarra nudged the other foal to its feet. It made the same wuffling noises that Yarra often made if he were worried ...

Though it was impossible to see through the blowing snow, Coolawyn knew that this was the other foal — the counterpart of Yarra. Somehow Yarra had

drawn it to him through the blizzard. She knew that there was a weird bond between them, a bond that made each one always search for, and find, the other. It was as though a spun-out web was linking them.

Coolawyn barely wondered where the mother had gone. Yarra had somehow drawn the foal to safety beside him.

The snow swirled down, all around. The shallow valley had become a wind tunnel. If they could reach the trees, they could huddle beneath them, they would be safer. Here, beside the rock, they were all plastered with snow.

Coolawyn forced herself away from the strong rock, to try to take the two foals to the cover of the trees. As the wind grabbed at them and hurled them up the valley, that second foal gave a neigh as though he knew quite certainly that his mother was close, and he struck off on his own. Yarra moved away from Coolawyn's side, but she grabbed at his mane. She knew that as long as Yarra stayed beside her, the other foal would come too.

Struggling to keep on her feet, she led them on, borne on the wind up the valley. She gathered her breath and snorted gently in their ears if the wind almost took them. The other foal called again, and just then they stumbled into the line of snow gums that closed the wide valley.

The trees were already becoming bowed over with the weight of snow, but underneath the weighed-down branches there would be almost bare ground.

Coolawyn pushed her way through the snow-covered leaves and twigs, leading the two foals beneath the canopy of bowed-over branches. There they were out of the grasping, tearing wind and the thick-falling snow.

Yarra was jittery, but the other little one could not keep still. At last he forced his head out through the branches, and he neighed a sad call, over and over again. During a pause for breath, he suddenly shook with excitement, for there was an answer blowing on the wind.

Yarra called him back under again, but he shot right out into the blizzard — and straight back. An exhausted mare stumbled after him.

The white mare nuzzled her foal all over. She had not a kick or a bite left in her. She barely seemed to know that Coolawyn was there. Her legs folded and she lay down to sleep.

The foals curled up between the two mares, warm and safe.

The wind blew and the cold snow fell outside the calm of their igloo.

## *To Get Below the Blizzard*

Burra was looking for his favourite mare.

The white stallion was trying to get his herd together. They were scattered everywhere, and he must get them down below the blizzard if he possibly could — lower down it would be warmer, and the snow would be falling as rain. He must get them out of the snow before the sun came out to shine blindingly on every prism of snow and ice.

Their way downward lay right into the blasting wind — into the stinging, biting, snow-laden wind.

None of the white mares and foals had followed as high as Paddy Rush's Bogong, but had stayed among the trees and rocks on the Brindle Bull. There was only one mare of his herd up there on Paddy Rush's Bogong, and that was the mare whom he had come to take back. She had vanished in the snow.

It was becoming desperately important — a matter of life and death for the herd — to get the young colts together and go on to pick up the remaining mares and foals and drive them down out of the snow ... the thought of that one white mare being left alone with her foal up in the deep snow worried him, and he knew that she had not come with him because of the white foal who ran with the beautiful grey mare.

Where did the grey mare get the white foal?

He stood still for a while, buffeted by the wind and the snow, often throwing up his head to call, but his voice was carried away by the blizzard.

A shadow loomed up, then another. The young horses were coming to him.

Now that they were all mustered, their way lay into the hurl of the wind.

The white mares and foals were somewhere ahead. Behind was that white mare. She might make her own way down to safety, if only her foal would leave Yarra. That anxious white stallion had to return to his herd and take them to their own country.

It was disturbing to go without that one mare, and he kept looking back to see if she were following.

He saw only the driving snow.

Did he imagine a pair of shadow foals? There was nothing except a cloud of wind-whirling flakes. Those two foals who caused his mare to leave him were only a dream surely. It was ridiculous that two identical foals should belong to

two different herds. Somehow their obsessive need to be together made life impossible. He would leave the herd in safety, down near the Tin Mines, and go back.

Daylight would come, and what then? What then?

Burra was calling. Coolawyn heard his neigh, though it was muffled by the snow-thick branches that made a canopy overhead.

She heard the longing — and, possibly, some fear — in his neigh, and the sound was like that which he had made after the great flood, when he was so afraid that he had lost her for ever.

Her answering call startled the two foals and the white mare who were with her. Her call seemed so loud because it was enclosed by leaf and branch and snow, and it filled their ears. Perhaps it did not travel outside to the half-lit world of snow.

Coolawyn had stood up, and her head brushed the icy ceiling that curved over them. The other three still lay close to the trunk of the snow gum that sheltered them.

The heat from their bodies had partly melted the snow on the branches and then the melting snow had frozen, making a curved ceiling of ice above them.

Burra's call came again, and it came from closer.

Coolawyn pushed her head and shoulder out amidst a shower of snow and the tinkle of ice that was shaken from the leaves.

There in the grey dawn, Burra stood, his beautiful grey head pointing to the sky as he called. His mane and forelock, and his tail, were all matted with snow, but his whole body vibrated with the power of the neigh he flung to Coolawyn. The faint light of the coming day touched him as though there were a light within his body, so that he glowed with life in that blizzard world.

The snow slowly ceased to fall as the dawn crept through the clouded sky. The wind had changed, and raced out of the gates of the day, lifting the snow from trees and rocks and from the ridge tops, lifting it in great twisted spirals, as the daylight strengthened. Coolawyn watched as a dancing willy-willy of snow spun round and round Burra, hiding him entirely, winding upwards.

She burst out of her covering of branches, and snow, and ice, and she called as she went towards him, ploughing through the deep snow.

Then the tall spiral of snow whisked away on the wind, and there was Burra.

Snow exploded off the branches as Yarra and that other foal pushed their way out of their igloo, and the bent snow-gum limbs, freed of their weight of snow, whipped upwards.

Burra, quite startled, watched the white mare appear too, and he realised that

danger had forced her to cease attacking Coolawyn. He knew, too, that there was no time for bickering now.

He must collect his herd together, and head for the Cascades. It was time to take them down to lower country.

A lone currawong flew across the grey sky calling: 'Winter.'

Two brown ducks winged their way across the sky in the direction of the Indi River. Soon in the high mountains there would only be heard the occasional howl of a dingo, or a fox's bark. A hare might leave its track, but the mountains would be enfolded in the white silence of winter's snow.

Snow could mean death to foals — even foals who had been strong enough to survive the flood.

That white stallion was driving his herd down through country which he had only seen for the first time the night before, and which now, of course, was completely different, covered by snow. With every step he took, he knew he had left a mare and foal behind. He kept wondering how she was faring.

Already more light was coming into the clouds. They might dissolve and the sun could shine. He must drive his herd even faster, so that they were not caught by a dazzling day.

Burra had not yet realised that he would have a mare and two foals that would find the glare off the snow quite blinding. He did notice that, even though the other foal was with them, Yarra clung very close to Coolawyn's flank, touching her. Then he noticed that the white mare and her foal had their eyes almost shut. Yarra had his eyes closed, too.

Burra stared at each one of them. If they momentarily opened their eyes, surely their eyes were the colour of a fine sunset. Floating up to the surface of his mind came the memory of that red eye — just one eye — staring at him through the mint bushes. That was the night after the flood had swept one foal away. A shiver trembled down Burra's grey back, and it was not caused by cold snow.

He heard Yarra calling to that other foal, saw the mare trying to keep up with Coolawyn. A small branch blew across the snow and hit her on the shoulder. She shied as though she had not seen it.

On they went. Two of the older mares led the way, breaking track through the snow. Burra urged the white mare and her foal from behind. Coolawyn kept Yarra by her side. Soon Burra heard the small snuffling noise that Coolawyn and Yarra were making to each other, and it seemed that the other mare and her foal

had heard them and had begun making the same noise, so that they stayed together and did not get lost. They struggled up closer to Yarra and Coolawyn. There was no snapping and kicking now. It was strange that Coolawyn had begun to feel a sense of responsibility for the other foal — and necessarily for its mother.

No one was there to see this odd-looking herd, except a few kangaroos that were hopping through the snow, and a flock of currawongs that flew overhead.

Burra knew he would get all his herd down to the Cascades or the head of the Ingegoodbee, but he felt a tremendous urge to be a long way down the mountains before dark came again. He remembered the previous winter's huge amount of snow. The whole feel of it was invading him, and the memory of flooded rivers gave a fearsome dread.

Coolawyn had been in snow every winter of her short life, and she was strong. She plodded on, and kept repeating her little wuffling sounds of encouragement to Yarra, and constantly turned her head to touch him on the nose.

She had known instinctively for some time that Yarra, though he could gallop as swiftly as the flight of a hawk, had something wrong; perhaps he did not see very well.

Once or twice she called a little louder, so that the white mare and her foal would hurry, but they were keeping close. Already she and Yarra had saved these two, so that a bond was forming between them, in spite of the enmity which the white mare felt.

The snow had stopped falling and it melted off their eyelashes. Coolawyn could see more easily, but the other three still had their eyes closed.

The herd stopped to rest, quite often, so the foals could drink from their mothers and feel renewed. Occasionally, the tracks made by the white herd were not covered by snow. Sometimes they were just indentations. Sometimes the white herd had veered from the right direction. Burra's elderly mares led like homing pigeons.

After dropping down off the Brindle Bull, they crossed the Big Boggy, and were soon in quite thick trees. It was clear from the markings in the snow that the white stallion had let his herd rest there.

Burra had no wish to get embroiled with those midnight gallopers just now, so he let his herd rest there, too, and knew the other herd would keep going.

Midnight gallopers, and in his herd was one of the mares ... and was it just one foal? Yarra and that foal were so amazingly alike.

## *Ringa, the Red*

Once upon a time, the men and women of the snow country would say: 'Thunder in winter means snow.'

Thunderstorms are things of spring and summer, but there had been so much thunder all through spring, summer, and even in the autumn. Now it was winter.

Ringa, the white stallion with the strange eyes, began to feel that he must try to find his mare. He missed her dearly. Even the two fears of brilliant lightning and the dazzling light of sunshine reflected off snow, could not stop him.

A thunderstorm rolled up and crashed. On the highest mountains snow fell, but Ringa was fairly certain that Burra's herd would be well below the heaviest fall.

So he went.

It was a dark winter's night. Clouds covered the sky, and no stars shone. Even he, Ringa the red, found it difficult to see the track. It was a track that had first been made by bare, black feet, and by kangaroos and dingoes. Cattle had widened it. It was still there, although now no cattle went up and down it.

Never had Ringa found the trees loom so close and so menacing. Never before had it seemed as if the icy night was warning him.

He had a long way to go, and nothing seemed to tell him exactly where Burra's herd would be, or how low they had come down out of the snow. He felt almost sure that his mare would be with them, unless Coolawyn, that lovely grey mare, had driven her off.

Ringa trotted on and on, through forests and low scrub, over ridges where the warmer air enfolded him comfortingly and into gullies where the icy cold was like needles driven into his white hide.

He started upwards just as the rain began, but the track was wide and well defined. The spur itself forced him to keep on the track.

The whole world of steeply rising spur, ribbon gums and messmates, was utterly silent.

Ringa was glad when he had climbed high enough to be among the giant alpine ash, where the streamers of bark were sighing and creaking with every movement of air. Even though he was no longer enfolded in that utter silence, the whispering streamers were even more mysterious and eerie than the silence.

Suddenly, a long streamer of bark swung and cracked, broke from the tree,



and fell on to Ringa's back.

He plunged forward; loose stones rattled. The white stallion stopped still and listened.

Then it happened — the soft sound came rising from the gully on the south side of the spur. That was where they had come from before ... Pinpoint red eyes, glittering ... those moths ... they should have laid their eggs well before winter and died, melted into the earth ...

They fluttered and floated in front of him, soft and ghostly, a barely visible cloud.

He stood quite still. He could not even try to go through that cloud of wings. There were moths in the very air he breathed. Choking, he began to back slowly. He could not tell whether the cloud of soft, paperbark wings were angrily stopping him from going further, or warning him against some danger. Surely nothing that lived in the night would ever harm him — he, Ringaroo, who galloped in darkness. Then he began to feel certain that these red-eyed moths, flying desperately at him, were friendly.

He backed a little further. The moths renewed their efforts to drive him faster, down the wide track between the alpine ash. Sometimes it was as though they were like a soft covering all over him; sometimes they were flying against his face, forcing him down the spur.

The red eyes got brighter as he tried to resist the pressure. He kept seeing a vision, coming and going in front of him — that beautiful mare whom he had left behind in the high mountains, and her foal. How could he leave her? Surely she was with that other herd who travelled and grazed by day. Yet she could be all alone and lost. Somehow he seemed to see her foal and that other absolutely similar foal, Yarra, together. But where *was* the mare? Where were the foals?

Why were the moths warning him? Of what were they warning him? Then he heard the roll of thunder, just as another insubstantial vision floated in front of his mind. The distant thunder reverberated and his mind's picture suddenly became a memory of that lovely mare desperately clinging with her hooves and front legs to a flooded bank — one foal scrambling up on to dry land, another foal being swept downstream.

The moths had forced him off the centre of the ridge and under a huge alpine ash, when the whole world shook with a crash of thunder and there was a wide sheet of lightning that lit up the forest of immensely tall trees.

Ringaroo closed his eyes against the glare. The moths must have known what was coming — felt its message in the vibrations of the air.

He stood, absolutely still, his eyes tightly closed. It was strange that those moths had survived the first onslaught of winter's snows. They surely must have

laid their eggs by this time, on the undersides of the tea tree leaves in the paperbark gullies.

Ringaroo opened his eyes. The moths began to fly at him even more desperately than before. He must do as they bid. Perhaps they were trying to force him out of the high country for all of the winter.

He kept on backing down the track ... there was no mistaking that they meant him to go right down, so he turned around and began to trot. The moths continued to press him on.

There was a tea tree thicket in a small gully to one side of the ridge. The moths pushed him in there just as the rumbling thunder started again. Ringaroo could feel them on his back. Strangely their eyes did not seem so bright. He suddenly felt that they had made their last effort to get him to safety. The beautiful paperbark wings had no life left in them. Some of those wings were even folded over the red eyes.

The sheet lightning lit up the sky, and Ringa closed his eyes. When he opened them, he could see dead moths on the ground at his feet, dead moths festooning the tea tree branches, and he knew that some were still on his back.

No red eyes looked at him through the night, but the moths had given their message: 'Peril for Ringaroo lurks in the high country, in winter. Go there if you dare.'

A mare who had always been beside him — till that enormous flood — was up there, possibly lost, beyond that barrier.

Higher up in the mountains, where the wind cried through twisted snow-gum limbs, snow had fallen earlier.

A mare with two foals had become filled with fear, and was desperately trying to find her way out of this terror that was all white ... stumbling along.

One of the foals kept calling the other back.

Somewhere in that beating storm, another mare cried out in desperation. Somewhere a stallion called and searched, called and searched.

## *A Willy-willy Enveloped him and he Vanished*

Thunder in winter means snow ...

Softly down through the giant alpine ash the great flakes fell. Floating, too, in between the tea tree limbs, the star-shaped crystals drifted.

Ringaroo felt each feather-light and ice-cold touch on his back. All around him there was silence, except for the whisper of floating snow, but higher up there was a strong wind, and the snow blew in smaller, stinging, dancing dervish pellets.

Crimson and blue lowries flew through those swirling curtains, all tossed around. Coolawyn half-expected the chattering birds to give her some message. But when they were gone the only sounds were made by the wind and the beating snow.

Fear began to flow through snow gums and alpine ash. It whispered around Ringaroo.

It seemed, suddenly, to be whispering in the falling snow around Coolawyn. Fear; fear because Yarra had vanished, in the snow, with that white mare and her foal.

Coolawyn had no certainty which way, in all the wind-blown clouds of snow, they had gone. She called and called; fell through the thick-falling snow. She thought she heard Yarra call, but was he answering, or just neighing?

She raced off as fast as she could go on the already covered snowgrass and rocks, and logs, in the direction of the sound — or from whence she thought the sound had come through the storm. But where had it come from? Which direction? She stopped and listened. A currawong flew, without a cry, through the wild blowing blizzard. Perhaps that currawong was pointing the way? She could barely see through her snow-matted eyelashes. Yarra ... Yarra? She stopped to call again. Did a neigh come? She gave another desperate call. There was nothing.

She went hurrying blindly in another direction, her breath sobbing with fear and effort. There was a faint track, just an indentation in the snow — but it was a track made by herself. She had gone in a circle. Coolawyn, the bush-wise, Coolawyn, the beloved of Burra, had never been lost before, even in wild, wild weather.

The snow poured down. The twisting wind blew hither and thither, taking

Coolawyn around and around.

Down in the tall timber, voices were in the wind singing. Voices were calling Ringaroo, and he knew he must go. The moths' message was not really in vain. He had to go back into the high country, but the moths' warning had ended with great strength. In the drifting flakes the moths had died.

Ringaroo, Ringaroo, climbing up, one white leg after one white leg, eyelids half-closed over those sunset-coloured eyes, and the snow clinging to his lashes.

Ringaroo, Coolawyn, Wirralinga, Yarralala, and that unnamed foal, stumbled round and round in the twisting snow and the wind — and Burra, without scent or sign, tried to find Coolawyn. Wind crying through the rocks and trees ... Burra searching and never finding a track.

Two mares, two foals going round and round, lost in the blizzard.

The wind became a gale. Nothing appeared to be real. Trees became looming monstrous horses. Rocks seemed to move, as though bewitched.

The wind twisted Coolawyn around, and blew stinging, blinding pellets of snow into her eyes; as she stumbled over a snow-masked rock, it grabbed at her and nearly blew her on to her side.

She stood still for a moment, shaking with fear and misery. She knew she must stop going in circles. A big rock seemed to stay still while she stared at it, and there was a tree leaning over it. She thought she remembered them both. Though both tree and rock looked enormous one minute and small the next, they seemed to be quite close by. She fought her way across the wind towards them, thinking to shelter there. They got further and further away, but at last she reached them.

When she had regained her breath, and her heart had stopped pounding, she peered through the streaming flakes to find another landmark that would not keep fading away, so that she could go towards it, and she would not walk in circles again. Once she thought Yarra was at her side, but no foal was there.

She had to find him, however far she might have to go.

With snow beating against her, swirling into her eyes, she slipped, stumbled and pushed her legs through the snow that had already blown into drifts.

She had had other foals before the flood took that last one and never before had she felt that something, someone else, might take a foal from her. Never had she felt so anxious for a foal as she did for Yarra — so possessive. The flood had taken, and the flood had given. Yarra was hers.

Burra, whom she loved so dearly, could not be the father of Yarra, for that white foal was really not part of his herd. Yarra seemed like a changeling, and, indeed, he was.

A neigh kept ringing out and she answered it, and then called Yarra at the same time, flinging the call into the distance. From Yarra there was no answer, but Burra's call came from closer and closer, till suddenly he was there beside her.

There was hope. Burra had come. Together they could find Yarra, but then fear flowed around her again, in the pellets of wind-driven snow.

All at once she was sure she heard Yarra call — a frightened call. Perhaps he was not with that white mare, or perhaps the white mare was lost.

Coolawyn had a queer feeling of responsibility for that mare and foal, because she and Yarra had saved them in the first snowfall that winter, but she also felt fear and dislike. There was something at the back of her head which she would not let come to the surface — something about that mare and about that foal — something that she would *not* acknowledge.

Burra had a feeling about them too. He was sure that Yarra would lead them into danger because of his obsession with that unnamed foal. Burra had lived for long enough to know that brumbies could not just let days and nights, life, slide by in winter. They had to make their own survival. They had to get down out of the snow — not go chasing after an identical foal. That foal and its mother seemed unable to find their way through the snow. If Yarra kept following them, and Coolawyn kept following Yarra, they would all die.

Coolawyn had gone from his side. Burra could see her like a shadow. He sprang after her, calling her insistently. If she wouldn't come, he would be forced to get around her and drive her. Each time he began to try to swing her in the direction he knew they should go, that forlorn neigh would sound from far away, and she would switch direction towards the area from which it had seemed to come. Even Burra began to be afraid they would be lost.

Fear crept through the snow gums and the tall ash. It whispered around Ringaroo.

It seemed suddenly to be haunting the blizzard that beat around Coolawyn and Burra.

Yarra's cry kept wavering through the blizzard, and at last they saw him. He was standing swathed around in the curtains of snow, all alone. Then out of the blizzard came a sound that was fragmented by distance.

Yarra seemed to spin around, as if that distant sound were closer to him. Snow flew up around him, a tremendous willy-willy enveloped him and he was gone.

Coolawyn gave a loud, wild neigh and began to struggle through the snow and the wind to the place where they had seen Yarra standing. She kept calling whenever she could get her breath. Both she and Burra heard a much more

distant neigh which Coolawyn was sure was still Yarra's. Burra stayed close to Coolawyn. Even he, who had found Yarra a nuisance and a puzzle, had become anxious about him.

Then, from far lower down the mountains there came another, wind-borne neigh. Both of them knew it was that of Ringaroo, the splendid stallion with the sunset eyes.

Burra and Coolawyn reached the place where Yarra had been standing when he called, before he vanished in the vortex of snow. There were still indented hoofmarks, even in the blinding snowfall.

It was then — or there — that the wind began a weird howling, eerie and frightening. With each howling, great spirals of snow rose up from somewhere just near them. Coolawyn shied away from an immense willy-willy that went rising round and round, seeming to be coming straight for her. As she tried to get out of the way, it followed her. She began to be really frightened. She felt that the willy-willy was alive. It was Burra who realised that that spiral began in some big hollow close beside them. Burra walked forward carefully, and Coolawyn crept up behind him, as the weird wind howl got louder, and an even bigger willy-willy spun round them both.

Burra took two more steps. Perhaps he knew he was on an edge: perhaps he did not. When he brought his four feet close together, the edge began to slide, and Burra went with it.

Coolawyn sprang forward as though to save him — and felt the snow begin to slide beneath her hooves.

For one minute the falling snow seemed to clear, and she saw Burra sliding down a steep slope — steep like a cliff, or more like a chute. It was serious — he was sliding quite fast, sitting with his dignity all intact. Then the snow on which she stood gave way and she was sliding at a great pace herself. Enveloped in freezing cold, it felt as if nothing could possibly stop them.

She heard Yarra neigh, down below. At that moment both Burra and Coolawyn knew where they were. They must have travelled quite a distance in their search for Yarra. They must be in a steep ravine which they had seen one summer when exploring, but it still seemed much steeper than anything they had seen before.

Burra was trying to get his feet underneath him, then he made a huge effort to get to one side. Coolawyn struggled with all her strength, but everything she did only made her slide faster.

There was something hard beneath the snow, hard and more utterly slippery than anything she knew, though she did remember sliding once, on a frozen swamp.

Ice was under the snow.

She tried to throw herself sideways. For one moment the ice beside her was bare of snow. She heard her hooves scrabbling on it. There was nothing funny about the situation any longer. She and Burra were sliding faster and faster.

Then it looked as if Burra struck a flat surface and, in a moment, Coolawyn was hurtling down the last steep pitch, and landing beside him, breathless and afraid.

They were on the snow-thick, flat surface of a pool of solid ice — a pool at the foot of a frozen waterfall.

Yarra's neigh sounded close, and then, calling him, came the voice of that unnamed foal.

Quickly Coolawyn gave an urgent neigh, a commanding neigh. She had to get his obedience, had to make him come to her and not follow that identical foal. Oh, who was that foal for whom she had no name? She sometimes even mistook him for Yarra. Who was he?

Burra knew that the only way he could take them all to safety would be to capture the mother of that foal, and drive them all around the mountains and through the forests until they reached the Cascades.

From much nearer than before came the call of the sunset-eyed stallion, the stallion who galloped by night, and who was making his way through this dense, dark blizzard.

### *His Magic Carpet Began to Go Faster and Faster*

Ringaroo had kept climbing, forcing himself to go on and on through the blizzard. Because there was no break in the clouds, no shafts of light at all, he felt no fear of the burning reflection off the snow by day. He, the midnight galloper, would forge his way through the dark blizzard, and find his mare and her foal ...

It was a lonely journey. Sometimes he saw kangaroos and wallabies as they made their way down to lower country, but possums stayed in their hollows and wombats rarely ventured from their burrows. All was quiet except for the wind-howl and the occasional *swish* of a bough springing up as it dropped its load of snow.

He seemed to have to travel further than he expected, endlessly further, and he had no idea where he was. After long, dragging hours he felt sure he heard a neigh. Wirilinga, his beautiful mare, must be somewhere close. If he called, she could come to him, and he dreamt of her walking towards him through the storm.

Highly-strung stallion, he became more nervous the further he went. He shied violently as a limb cracked under its weight of snow. He leapt into a gallop on a stretch of gently rising ridge when a black, giant flying phalanger, all dusted white, came gliding down off the high branches of a ribbon gum and landed near him.

He closed his eyes in very fear when an oblique beam of light broke through the clouds, and he pressed against the woolly butt of an alpine ash, so that he would have some anchor if vision failed.

The beam of light was extinguished, and the day seemed to be darker. He did see a robin amongst some eucalypt leaves. A little ground dove peered out from under a fallen leafy branch.

If only he could hear the hoofbeats of his herd, he would not feel so alone. He called into the storm, but called Wirilinga.

Burra listened to Ringaroo's neigh, then he peered all around through the dense-falling flakes, trying to make out the shape of the land into which he and Coolawyn had slipped, trying to remember it, as he had seen it in summer ... surely something would tell him what they should do, where they should go, but



that eerie howl of the wind came, and the wind picked up clouds of snow and all vision was obscured.

Burra knew he had to find Yarra and that white mare and her foal, or he would never stop Coolawyn wandering off, trying to find Yarra. He must get them all together and keep them together. Of course, if Wirilinga heard Ringaroo call, she would try to get to him, go with him, take the foal. Maybe she would take Yarra, and Coolawyn would go ...

They were in a hollow: the shape of it could only be made out if they walked around it. It was, in fact, a round basin. They knew that by their tracks. They had gone right round without seeing Wirilinga or either foal.

There was a cleft in one part of the wall of hills, and the wind came crying up through that cleft, and swept willy-willies up as it went across the hollow and whirled up the waterfall down which they had slipped. The howl the wind made was horrifying. Night was coming, and the darkness would become more intense.

The wind howl increased and another wild screaming blended with it, as it tossed a huge flock of black cockatoos up through the cleft, and around the hollow. Louder and louder came the weird howl, and the clamouring of the birds and the howl were both so loud that Ringaroo's call could not be distinguished.

Ringaroo had fought his way through the blizzard until he was very close, till he had gone past the head of the waterfall down which Burra and Coolawyn had slid. From the basin floor no-one could see him, high up above them on the rim of the steep-walled hollow. No-one except the black ghosts who flew and cried, saw him turn back and walk along the rim to where the break came at the head of the waterfall. The top of the hollow was shrouded in cloud and falling snow, so was not visible from below. Neither Burra nor Coolawyn could see Ringaroo, though they were fairly sure he was there.

Then, in the darkening blizzard, materialising out of nowhere, came Yarra, Wirilinga and her foal. Wirilinga was taking no notice of anyone, just gazing intently up towards the rim of the bowl, as if her eyes could pierce the dark blizzard and the clouds. She was trembling with excitement. Coolawyn was nuzzling Yarra, both of them wuffling with relief and delight.

Burra began to move around them, mustering them together.

There was no sound, but they all began to look upwards, towards the area of the waterfall. Something was moving up there, something all swathed around and hidden in snow.

Wirilinga gave a piercing neigh.

Ringaroo, hearing his mare call, turned around on the edge of the cliff, just near the waterfall. He felt the small cornice on which he turned begin to crack,

but he took no notice. He was not used to the ways of wind-plastered snow. It moved quite slowly in big blocks, but soon he was moving with it, still on his feet, but slowly toppling over, the huge snow blocks breaking up into wind-tossed powder. Then he was rolling down the steep cliff beside the waterfall ...

His magic carpet began to go faster and faster.

Rolling, sliding, somersaulting, breathing in the stinging, smothering snow particles, Ringaroo went.

From below, the waiting five could see nothing but a cloud of snow. Then the contour of the cliff flung that huge ball of snow into the icy slide which was the long final drop of the waterfall.

In an exploding cascade of snow spume, Ringaroo landed on the frozen pool and slid across to the waiting group.

The last vestiges of daylight faded into the darkness of the blizzard, and the weird howl came carrying willy-willies of snow.

Ringaroo had given his head a tremendous knock on an ice-covered rock, near the foot of the waterfall, so that when he landed on the frozen pool, his head was spinning and he was hopelessly giddy. He tried to make his legs work, tried to get his breath so that he could call.

The first call he succeeded in making did sound like the call of the midnight gallopers, but there was no sound of pounding hooves on earth and snowgrass and rocks. Coolawyn and Burra thought they heard that sound, even in their world of snow.

They backed away from the big ball of snow that slithered to their feet and then remained still. Wirrilinga knew in every tingling nerve that it must be Ringaroo and she must get close to him.

Suddenly, with a convulsive effort, Ringa made his legs move, lifted his head and managed to shake some sense into it, and snow flew all around him, so that he became part of the beating, streaming blizzard.

He got his forefeet firmly dug in, his shoulders up, his head up, too, but swinging slightly, from side to side, then he heaved himself on to his feet.

The watchers, Burra, Coolawyn, Wirrilinga and the foals, could see this shadow of a stallion, rocking perilously, in the force of the blizzard, barely able to keep his balance. Wirrilinga saw him shake his head, as though to clear pain away, then she stepped up to him, nose to nose. And the wind howled up into the hollow, bringing with it great willy-willies of snow.

There they stood, two stallions, two mares and two foals — ghosts in the wind-howl and the blasting snow — captives of the blizzard.

Burra knew that even if this bundle that had arrived at his feet were

Ringaroo, no filly was going to be stolen, here in this hollow in the hills. They were, all of them, almost lost; the beautiful stallion and his sunset-eyed mare, and Coolawyn, the pale grey whom the white stallion would like to steal for his herd and the two foals with sunset eyes — but who would live and who would die, in this enormous blizzard?

It was Burra who noticed the force of the wind strengthening, and knew it was a sign that the blizzard was going to blow itself out, that the snow would cease sometime soon, and the wind blow all the snow that covered the mountains to ice. If it became wind-packed and icy, they would not sink into it, and be able to travel.

If they were to live and not be frozen to death, they must find shelter. When the night was over, they would have to seek water and grass, or leaves, or seed pods to eat.

There would be no fighting for mares, or mares fighting for foals in this immense storm. All animals would have to be at peace with each other while the massive snow and the wild wind promised death.

The only way out of their encircling hills seemed to be where the frozen creek had an opening — but to where did that opening lead?

Burra began to urge Coolawyn and Yarra across the hollow. His eyes and Coolawyn's had become more attuned to the darkness in the last half hour. He looked at the blurred bulk that was Ringaroo; the horse was still shaking with pain or fright. Burra pushed the two mares and two foals together, Ringaroo lagged behind.

The opening in the hills was narrow and slippery, for the creek was frozen beneath the snow. Burra was urging the foals on when Wirrilinga dropped back to Ringaroo. Burra turned back to get Wirrilinga and Ringaroo and push them through that slippery opening.

They had disappeared.

### *Fading Into the Night and the Snow*

The gentle touch of Wirrilinga's nose on his, her breath mingling with his — the scent of her — had given life and energy back to Ringaroo. Suddenly he knew what they must do.

There was lower country where no dazzling reflection off snow would blind them by day. There was the night and the thrilling gallop through the dark.

When they reached the opening in the hills, Burra was having trouble getting that unnamed foal through, and while his attention was on the foal, Ringa took Wirrilinga, fading off through the night and the snow.

The wind came rushing and crying through the narrow cleft, blowing the white mare and her beautiful white stallion back into the centre of the hollow. Wirrilinga stumbled and was blown over. Ringaroo stood above her, protecting her from the wind and the snow. In that time Burra had driven Coolawyn and the two foals down the other side towards a band of snow-covered rocks. There was protection, in those rocks, from the storm.

In the night the force of the wind grew till it was stronger than a hurricane. Perhaps snow was no longer falling, but the wind gathered it up in such huge clouds that the horses could barely breathe. Burra and Coolawyn were in some shelter, under an overhanging rock and with big rocks all around them.

Ringaroo and Wirrilinga were out in that basin with death very close.

Burra made the two foals lie down with Coolawyn and himself. He had a horrible feeling of tragedy pending. Somehow he must protect Coolawyn from freezing to death, and he knew, grudgingly, that he would have to protect that foal whom the flood had given her, and which meant so much to her.

The wind screamed among the rocks, and Burra pushed the foals closer together. Then from far away came a neigh, all muffled by snow and wind. It was Wirrilinga calling her foal. Then, strangely, from far higher up, there came stronger calls.

Burra shook his head, trying to dispel sounds of clamouring voices.

It was Wirrilinga, during the endless walking which she and Ringaroo did so that they would stay alive during the freezing night, who realised that the wild wind was blowing the snow to ice and, in places, blown to a blistered ice on which hooves could get a grip. It was Wirrilinga who stepped out of the track they had

made, round that hollow, and found that she did not sink.

She urged Ringaroo out of their beaten track and heading in the direction from whence the calls of their herd had come. Just there the side of the hollow was not so very steep. They might succeed in getting up and right out without slipping back ...

It was as they climbed over the rim of the hollow that the calls of the night gallopers rang out again — just when the first faint light came into the sky. Ringaroo took command then. He knew they must reach cover before the light could get bright.

Suddenly he was afraid. He had Wirrilinga safely with him, now, and he only had time to wonder how they were going to get out of the snow. He must not think of those two identical foals, nor of the beautiful pale grey mare. He must keep struggling on, and get Wirrilinga into the shelter of trees. Wirrilinga did not appear to be worrying about her foal. In fact, she knew that he was safe with the bush-wise Coolawyn. Had not Coolawyn saved them in the first night of the blizzard?

A great blast of wind had hurled over the mountains before first light. It roared through every crevice in the rocks where Burra and his little herd were lying.

Wirrilinga's foal leapt to its feet, and it seemed as if he were blown out of the shelter of the rocks. Yarra sprang up too, and Coolawyn after him, with Burra scrambling from under the overhanging rock. Into the wind and the clouds of blowing snow they went. Dawn was coming, and with the dawn the wind might drop for one fine day in the middle of a long blizzard — for one brilliant, blinding day. As the sun came up, the snow prisms were blue and gold, brilliant, diamond-faceted — unbearable to those sunset-coloured eyes.

As Burra had expected, the wind had blown the snow to ice, with velvet-filled gullies, down which the foals loved to roll. He did not let them stop much, but kept them head to flank with Coolawyn, travelling south.

Ringaroo and Wirrilinga found a grove of snow gums growing around what was probably a swamp when it was not frozen and covered with snow. There, Wirrilinga led Ringaroo in under snow-bowed branches — just as Coolawyn had led her and the two foals — and there they could rest their eyes from the glare, stay completely still, and just listen to the silence of the world of snow.

After a long time there was a sound — just a neigh from high up on a ridge — and Wirrilinga knew that it was the voice of a young colt belonging to their herd ... the one they had heard calling out of the night. She and Ringaroo would have to try to join them.

The brumbies who galloped by night had seemed, to Burra, to have upset the order of life whenever they had invaded the high country. This time they seemed to have been appearing for one whole spring and summer. Now winter had come.

For all this time Burra had been anxious and he was a little afraid. He was afraid that he might lose Coolawyn. There had been so much thunder. Burra felt that the big flood, when last winter's snow melted, had forced Ringaroo and his herd out of their usual territory. Always at the back of his mind was the memory of that mysterious red eye, or red star, gleaming through the mint bushes over on the other side of the Indi River while the flood had raged by. There was, too, the uneasy feeling that Yarra brought trouble — Yarra with his obsession with Wirrilinga's half-blind foal.

As his hooves chipped into the wind-blown ice, and while he tried to keep both Yarra and the unnamed foal head to flank with Coolawyn, on ahead, Burra felt certain that Ringaroo and Wirrilinga had joined up with some young colts, and were battling their way towards lower country on a parallel course.

There and then, Burra made up his mind that once they got below the snow, he would drive Ringaroo of the red eyes down the river and far away. The foals ...? Coolawyn had borne a black foal like all the other foals in his herd — black, who would finally become grey. That foal whom Coolawyn had brought back from the flood, who was he?

Burra could barely tell which was which of the two foals that he was driving along. Which was Yarra? He realised, now, that Yarra had always clung close to Coolawyn. Was he half-blind, too?

Burra seemed to hear clamouring voices again. There was nothing else to do except keep walking on and on over the wind-packed, icy snow. They must get lower while the snow remained hard.

At last they were in among trees. Black shadows of trunks and branches were like a jigsaw puzzle on the glittering snow. Burra let the foals rest for a while, in a big clump of snow gums. Half the bright, sunny day was past. The foals were tired. They had reached a place not very far above the Cascades. Burra was half-asleep on his feet. Tree shadows on snow; ghost shadows of huge animals; black shadows, and always voices. Burra stretched out his nose to Coolawyn's. He did not see that her ears were cocked as though she were disturbed by some sound.

Surely Burra knew that none of the big animal shadows was real. But the whole world of trees and shadows and dream animals, of blizzards and blinding light, foals and floods, a white stallion and mares, had become dangerous.

A faint haze in the sky told Burra that there would only be one fine day. More snow was coming. This might be a second heavy snow year.

He must drive that big white stallion with the strange eyes right back to his own country before the melting snow in spring created another flood. Let the flood force him to stay there.

By morning, dark clouds had gathered, and thunder in winter means snow.

## *A Black Foal Again*

Some tussocks of grass still showed above the snow in the Cascades — even though the snow kept falling. Burra's herd were grazing there, and food would last a little while. There was a familiar happiness about the valley, and Burra decided to stay there until snow pushed them to look further down for feed.

Then, one night, far heavier clouds gathered — ominous clouds with dark centres and edges frayed by wind. Burra could not settle down, but paced around his sleeping herd. Thunder was coming, and more heavy snow, but there was something else. A vibration in the air? Distant galloping hooves? A shiver went along his back. Suddenly, Coolawyn was standing close beside him. He felt a shiver run along her hide, too. The sound became closer. It was that drumming sound of horses.

Those galloping hooves seemed to stop on a hill above the bend in the creek. Then both Coolawyn and Burra noticed the first rumble of thunder. It took their attention for a moment and they failed to see, or hear, a movement made by the unnamed foal.

A neigh blended in with the thunder.

Then that foal was just a slip of a white wraith blown along the valley.

Burra and Coolawyn knew that the neigh in the night was Wirrilinga calling her foal. A huge sheet of lightning in the east lit up the marble-white stallion who was standing on a knoll, Wirrilinga beside him, and the ghost foal galloping towards them.

Then the lightning faded away and the drumming of hooves started again. Another sheet of light showed the last glimpse of white horses galloping away and propping to a blinded standstill. Then, as the darkness came again, there came the drumbeat, and they were gone.

Burra shook his head as though to drive the sound away. No filly had been stolen this time. Coolawyn was warm and safe beside him. Only Wirrilinga's foal had been reclaimed.

Yarra had woken and seemed to know what had happened. Distressed, he went quickly to Coolawyn for her comforting milk.

Time had passed. Only a few more months and he should be weaned — as would Wirrilinga's foal — and in the natural course of things, both mares would have another foal.



The only one who would miss Wirrilinga's foal would be Yarra. Yarra who had always searched, and only briefly found.

By morning, the snow promised by the thunder was falling so thickly that it was really time for Burra to urge his herd lower.

He did not take them by way of the Cascade Spur, the route which he thought — and hoped — Ringaroo had taken. Burra's herd made their way south on the track above the giant alpine ash, high above the river, over Packsaddle Gap, into the lower, gentler valleys, and arrived at the head of the Ingegoodbee River just as night was falling.

The ground was already dark, but the faint light in the sky was reflected in those still, calm, lovely pools where the Ingegoodbee heads.

Ever since he was a foal, Burra had seen his own face mirrored in them. He had seen his mother's face pictured there, too, and understood that the pools reflected them as they drank. Now he saw Yarra go to drink and spring backwards in surprise, and Burra knew that the foal saw his own image and thought that it was that unnamed foal. He saw Yarra look around swiftly, then paw the water in a sort of desperation. There was no other, identical foal.

What strange secrets were being whispered in the moving candlebark leaves? Only Coolawyn would know that Yarra had been carried to her by the waters of that raging flood. Only the whispering leaves of the trees on the riverbanks, and the half-submerged tea trees, could tell where that foal had come from.

Several mares in Ringaroo's herd had known and more than half forgotten that Wirrilinga had given birth to twins — white, because she and Ringaroo were both albinos — and one had been swept away in the roaring water. No-one had remembered, because they had not seen Yarra. The sight of him and the unnamed foal together would have reminded them, and a mystery would have had an explanation.

Thunder in winter means snow ...

There were no great rock tors, just there near the Ingegoodbee pools, around which the thunder would roll and reverberate, but clouds were gathering in. Heavy clouds pressed down and then snow began to fall, and soon lay quite thickly on the ground. The herd would get hungry. Even Yarra could not wander far. Burra knew that the white herd would not risk coming through the snow again, to try to steal Coolawyn.

Spring had to come, but of course spring would bring more thunderstorms. Already thunder and lightning were becoming even more frequent.

And, after a while, spring rain did fall. Grass began to grow slowly on the hillsides that face east and north, and shrubs put out fresh leaves. Hovea

flowered, its purple flowers even showing above the snow, vivid and thrilling.

Burra had to make a move before Ringaroo did. He heard a kookaburra laughing, heard and saw a huge flock of currawongs high in the sky, circling, carolling; heard a thrush heralding the spring.

Thunder came again without snow falling. It was springtime, with warm wind and torrential rain.

Burra left his herd safely on the divide above the Ingegoodbee pools, and set out to find Ringaroo before the rivers rose too high, intending to drive him far away down the Indi and force him to stay in his own territory.

Like the previous year, spring was late arriving, and several foals were already on the ground, but the herd was safe. Burra went back through the alpine ash. He turned down on the big Cascade Spur.

Night was not far off. A wombat was already out, nosing around for tucker before the storm came. An echidna hurrying home down the shaley track, lifted his long, enquiring snout as Burra passed him. Darkness closed in, and heavy clouds gathered. Soon one of the mopokes who lived on the spur called another. Through the interlaced branches, Burra could see the clouds gathering fast. All the animals whom he had seen were hurrying ... Every hair of his grey coat, and those long, dark, sensitive hairs in his ears, told him that a vast storm was coming. Already he could hear water rushing down the Cascade creek. He hurried.

Something told him that he would find Ringaroo in a storm.

Wind was getting up. The usual sounds of an ash forest — the swaying and creaking of the bark streamers — grew louder and louder, so that all other sounds were obliterated, but Burra could feel that he was being followed. He was wondering so much about what was ahead that he did not think of being followed. He hurried down the aisles of giant alpine ash.

Lower down, lightning blazed on the tall white trunks of the ribbon gums.

More claps of thunder, more noise of wind in the treetops — he became almost desperate to find Ringaroo before that white stallion fled from the storm. He may already be too late.

At the foot of the spur there were hoofmarks. Burra dropped his nose down to them. He was sure they were Ringaroo's, and made quite recently. Ringaroo had churned up the ground and then turned down the small, grassy flat.

There was the river ... a dark ribbon. Snow melt had already made it into a banker — and it was rising. Burra stood looking at it for a moment. Then he heard that sound again, the drumming of hooves, not far downstream, the beat of it carried away occasionally by the pulse-beat of the rising water.

Burra saw a sudden vision of Coolawyn. Ringaroo had his own most-loved

mare back, safely with him. If he really had come for Coolawyn — back in the first winter snow — and Burra felt sure he had, it was time for him to vanish. Burra had come all the way from the Ingegodbey to drive him back to his own bingle. He would quite certainly give him such a beating that he would never come back.

Anger flowed through Burra: a red film seemed to fog his vision. He could hear Ringa galloping towards him, then just see the great white horse racing through the night — and he sprang at him.

They collided — the white horse and the grey — screaming with rage.

Burra was slightly the heavier, and his full weight came against Ringaroo's near shoulder, spinning him around towards that dark river. Burra recoiled with the force of the impact, and sprang again quickly, before Ringa could turn around. Such was the force of Burra's charge that he sent Ringa stumbling, and he was almost on the edge of the river.

Ringaroo gathered himself together, swung around, and reared to strike with both forefeet.

Burra hurled himself wildly at the white, misty horse — this stallion who dared to come by night to try to steal Coolawyn! They both heard the enormous rumbling of thunder as they crashed together.

They were swaying on the edge of that raging river, as sheet lightning filled the sky.

Burra saw Ringaroo poised for a moment, like a horse cast in pewter, then drop his head, as though blinded by the brilliant light. He saw, too, beyond him, that a huge tree had fallen into the river on the opposite side. He threw himself at Ringaroo, and realised in that same instant that the great white stallion could not see, but it was too late to stop in mid-charge.

Ringaroo lost his footing, and suddenly they were both flying through the flaring sky into that silver, rushing stream.

As the lightning faded, Burra saw Ringaroo's body bob up in the water, then sink again and vanish below a big branch of the fallen tree — and get caught there.

Burra, striking out in the freezing water, did not even know if he were struggling to fight Ringaroo, or to save him from drowning. He grabbed at the branch and pulled.

The branch broke free. Both horses were rushed downstream by the current, both struck out with huge effort, but the current went on, taking them downstream with it.

Burra felt Ringaroo beside him in the flooded river, beside him on the side nearest the bank. He could keep pushing him over. After a frightening struggle,

he felt earth under his hooves. Together both horses scrambled out, frozen, shaking and exhausted.

Burra had saved Ringaroo from drowning, and had no strength to do other than point him in the direction of his own territory.

They both stood, breathless, water pouring off them, trembling all over.

Burra had to get back across the Indi River before it rose higher and cut him off from his own country and his herd. He stood while he got some breath back, and stopped trembling, then he went up the riverbank quite a distance before he plunged in and aimed for the opposite side, finally scrambling out, just where he and Ringaroo had gone in first. Something told him that Ringaroo would never return.

Burra turned for home, making for the foot of the Cascade Spur. It was all lit up by lightning, but he did not see what it was that had been following him, for it was hidden in some bitter pea bushes.

As he started up the spur the whole scene was lit up again. The river, glittering platinum, was rising fast, and on the opposite side, one white foal, almost a yearling, stood alone, gazing across. The lightning faded to a faint glitter. Just then, out of the bitter pea, walked Yarra.

Yarra shied with fear away from the flooded river, but stood close enough to see the other foal.

Burra looked back before the lightning died completely and saw the two ... They were too far away for him to see that their eyes were half-closed.

The twin brothers stood, divided by the river that had divided them before. When the snow-melt subsided, the twin brothers would cross the river, often, and run together for a year or so, or always. With sunset-coloured eyes, they would gallop through the forests of the night.

Burra, too tired to climb fast up the spur, dreamed he heard Coolawyn calling him. There was a hollow guarded by ribbon gums, the home of a black-shouldered kite. Would he find the entrance to it, through rocks? There was a still, round pool in the centre of that hollow.

Burra, half-asleep, went as though pulled by a spider's gossamer thread till he walked through the passageway between the rocks. There was the round hollow and the guardian ribbon gums, like ghosts, tall and standing all around. There was the magic pool, not entirely visible, yet glowing deeply, the wraith of a grey mare beside it, and at her feet a newborn foal. The foal was too black to be seen in the dark of the night, but was not just a dreamed vision.

There was Coolawyn, herself, with her black foal at her feet, who would turn out to be grey like Burra.

## **Dancing Brumby's Rainbow**

## **Dedication**

*To Sue and John, with love and best wishes for happiness.*

## Epigraph

*I trace the rainbow through the rain,  
and feel the promise is not vain ...  
Life that shall endless be.*

*L. H. Heward 1897–1943*

## One

Choopa, the blue-roan brumby, was lying curled up against his mother, Dandaloo. Neither of them were really asleep. There was the sound of wind in the faraway treetops, but coming towards them. There was the moan of wind around granite rocks.

Choopa knew by the pulse beat in Dandaloo's body that something strange and thrilling had entered into their world.

It seemed to him that, for days now, there had been the whispering wind, and a mist so faint — twisting and vanishing, as though it bore a message.

He kept half-dreaming of the lakes in the high country. He and Dandaloo had gone to those lakes with Son of Storm. Son of Storm — the big, gentle, brown stallion.

In fact, Choopa knew that it was Dandaloo who had taken them all to the high lakes. He had been sure at the time, and never really forgotten, that she hoped that his going into those dreamlike lakes might make him grow till he was the size of other foals of his age, give him strength and beautiful stature. He had walked far out into the lakes, even been forced to swim, but nothing had changed; he was still a dwarf. He did know, however, that there was some grace given him by those waters of the high country lakes.

In his memory music played over those waters, and the gift he had received was his wonderful sense of dance and it was as though that music played forever. In fact, the music had come up from that other valley on the far side of the Snowy River.

Choopa lay there, beside Dandaloo, *almost* hearing that music, dreaming of the swaying rhythm that he felt sure *must* always sound in the depth of the lakes.

He must go, he must really hear it, not just dream it.

The beat of Dandaloo's heart was against his small body; the message in the wind grew more insistent. Music was calling him, and surely a dream was calling her.

In a quick movement Choopa leapt up, ready to go through the night. Dandaloo stood up beside him, shaking the stiffness out of her old muscles, shaking herself in the dark. Whatever might be ahead, whatever might be between them and those spellbound high lakes, they were going. There might be mysteries, up there, in the ice that had carved out the deep hollows where water



now lay — mysteries of thousands of years before horses lived in the mountains.

Choopa led off, threading his way between tall, slender, white ribbon gums or the high, rough-barked messmates.

He heard Dandaloo's hoof-fall behind him, and another sound. A wombat? He had many friends among the young animals and they would follow through the dark, but when dawn came they would probably lie down and sleep where they could.

A faint mist seemed to flow around Choopa's legs. He looked back; that lissom mist was knee-high around Dandaloo, too, as though she were floating. Choopa felt strangely disembodied, out of touch with the world of solid granite and solid trees. He was living in a dream. Perhaps *he* was floating — and, floating, one might go anywhere.

All was utterly silent, till a mopoke called from a ribbon gum above. Choopa could just see him; then that owl took off, still calling 'mopoke, mopoke', as it vanished into the forest. Choopa felt that in each call there was a warning to all the creatures of the bush that brumbies were *floating* through the forest, floating in the mist.

He looked back at Dandaloo again, because things that float seem not quite real. He stopped so that he could touch her — feel her warm reality. She came gliding, floating towards him. One of her hooves, quite invisible, made a mist-muffled clink on a stone. Choopa extended his nose to hers. She rubbed her warm face against him.

There was no doubt of her reality.

It was time to go on, but the mopoke's story had gone ahead of them: there was a dwarf brumby, maybe the one who danced, and his mother floating through the forest on a swirl of mist. Something strange must be going to happen.

Never before had a mist made a stream on which brumbies could float; never before had that stream of mist borne them ever higher into the mountains.

Choopa heard the mopoke, heard the whisperings of that wind in the eucalypt leaves. A leaf brushed his ear and it was almost as though a bird's wing had brushed his ear with a message.

The mist felt damp on his legs — knee-high and no higher on the dwarf's small legs and knee-high on his mother's, too. A ribbon of mist simply swathing their legs as Dandaloo and Choopa made their way through the forest, as though it made a river in which they were flowing uphill.

Choopa was puzzled. The mist had barely been noticeable until he sprang up from his sleep and started to head towards Dead Horse Gap. Why had it suddenly flowed around them and not through the forest to either side? What had

made him suddenly so sure that his mother was longing for the high country?

The mist seemed to rise, enclosing him for a moment. Everything became uncertain. Then Dandaloo moved closer and rubbed against him; certainty came back again — the absolute certainty that they must head on to the highest peaks. Up there they might be above the mist and that which they were seeking might suddenly become manifest.

Choopa was right, Dandaloo did have a dream in her mind; she was possessed absolutely by this dream, and the dream was something that was whispered in the wind. A tale that the water told as the great snowdrifts melted into streams. And because it was the wind and the rippling water that told the tale, Dandaloo knew that it must be true.

Truths of the world are sung in the music of the spheres. A tale sung in a snow-fed stream, or by the moving leaves of the mountain ash, is straight from the breath of God.

Dandaloo did not really know what it was that the wind and the streams were telling her. She thought — and hoped — that it was a promise for Choopa. Somehow, that wise old mother also knew that there was a presence of danger. Had there perhaps been the form of an enormous stallion in among the rocks?

Choopa, too, could hear the songs and the murmured tales to which Dandaloo was listening, but he wondered what they meant and he was anxious. Yet all the time he knew, just as Dandaloo did, that they must press on to the high country.

Dandaloo felt certain that she was going to learn some secret of great importance. Choopa had the same sort of feeling, and yet, for him, a secret might be contained in music to which he could dance. Up on the very tops, the secret must exist, and he must try to learn it, even when the mist rose up around them.

Mist usually hid secrets, but this mist was carrying them ... towards the very heart of ... what?

## Two

It was when Dandaloo and Choopa were beside the last rocky outcrop, with its dwarf snow gums twisting their way up out of the granite rock fissures, that the moon rose slowly over the Crackenback Valley, and trees and rocks grew ghostly moon shadows.

Choopa shied. Shadow, or huge, fierce stallion? Was there anything there at all?

Dandaloo did not shy, did not believe there was anything to be seen. They walked up on the snowgrass basin as moonlight began to flood it and the silvery light made their own river of mist glitter around their legs.

There was no sound.

A wallaby hopped out of the mist from behind Choopa, shone in the moonlight that lit upon particles of mist moisture which clung to its soft coat — and vanished.

Choopa was disquieted. He looked back. Dandaloo was still following. Why had the wallaby disappeared when it left the river of mist? Dandaloo must not vanish. She must not fade away, nor must he himself. They must go on together to the high lakes.

Was that only a moon shadow? Could it be a huge horse? Where had that wallaby gone?

Choopa tried to stop himself from being jumpy. He waited till Dandaloo was beside him. The mist seemed to get colder, wetter. The shadows thrown by trees and rocks were surely moving.

They climbed on up the big basin. Then the only shadows were their own — horse moon shadows climbing up beside them, but without mist around the shadow-legs. Choopa watched their shadows out of the corner of his eye — Dandaloo's shadow behind his, and there was the happy, bumpy shadow of a wombat close behind hers, but no wallaby shadow. The wombat must be too cumbersome and too slow to jump out of the river of mist and vanish.

The river of mist was their safeguard, their promise.

The rocky tor of the South Ramshead was above them. Soon they would climb the last few feet up onto the ridge that looked down into the steep Leatherbarrel Valley. Choopa loved that valley, but the lakes kept calling him. Before the moon set he must get to that double lake in the Northcote Canyon and

splash the water up into the silver light of the moon.

As he climbed the last few steps onto the top of the ridge, Choopa had a whole mixture of memories of that first journey he had made to the high country — memories of Son of Storm and of the foal, Bri Bri, who was now so much bigger than he. He remembered dancing into the lakes.

Bri Bri loved to watch him dancing, but she never danced. It would be fun to have a yearling or two-year-old of his own size who would romp and dance with him. He called a gentle call to the imagined playfellow. There was no answer.

The music which he had once heard way up near the highest mountains was lilting through his head. He did a few dancing steps, put his head down into the moon-glinting mist, and turned a somersault. Somehow, he felt sure that something exciting lay ahead — an answer to a question, the fulfilment of a dream. *His dream or Dandaloo's.*

Moonlight flooded mountains and valleys. Such a lot of memories and dreams became like moon-shadows in Choopa's mind ... little blue-roan dwarf whose legs would keep doing a dance in the mist.

There were magic memories of the double lake; just dancing memories of happiness. It was at that other lake below the great overhanging snowdrift on the highest mountain that the men had caught him. Even though Franz, the man whom he loved, must have organised to have him caught, it really had seemed as if Franz were sorry, rubbing his ears and comforting him all through that long journey.

At last the long journey had ended, and then there was the music, the music and the dancing camels, the music and the dancing. Finally, there had been the unlocked gate and the long journey from the circus, over the rolling hills, till he found Dandaloo.

Choopa sighed deeply at his mixture of memories and dreams, and turned back to rub against Dandaloo.

Now they must reach that ice-cold, double lake. Together they walked on. And the lake where the men had captured Choopa lay shining in the moonlight below its very high mountain and the curved cornice of the dust-stained snow of last winter. There was still a long way to go — right over two heads of the Snowy River and up and over the Northcote Pass before they would reach the glowing, jewel-like double lake.

It was indeed a long way, and longer by moonlight, but they crossed those two heads of the great Snowy River and had climbed up on to the crescent pass before the moon had started to slide behind the long and rocky Townsend Spur.

Choopa and Dandaloo stood breathless on the Northcote Pass looking at the lake

that lay absolutely without a ripple on the floor of the Canyon. The water was all diamonded by moon shafts.

Choopa gazed for one moment, then sprang off, down the steep slope, in a wild gallop, his queer legs flying out sideways — galloping on and on, right to the glittering brink, then plunged in, for it seemed as if the water were calling him, the lake calling him from its freezing depths.

Excitement was rising up inside him like a huge bubble. The moment had come when he was plunging further and further into that marvellous lake again.

Suddenly he was over the edge of the stony shelf, swimming in deep, deep water. Dandaloo had followed Choopa into the lake, but not over the edge of the stony shelf, backing off as soon as she felt nothing but deep water beneath her forefeet. She simply stood on the edge, watching her strangely misshapen dwarf swimming. Just then he seemed, to her, to be a big and beautiful stallion, his head and arched neck just out of the water as he swam out there in front of her, in the lake of dreams.

She called him in a soft, gentle neigh that floated out over the surface of the lake.

Choopa swam back to her and scrambled out onto the stony shelf. Then the two blue roans circled round and round each other, bucking and rearing on the snowgrass bank, where they bucked and reared, rolled and played, till they were dry. Finally, they lay down on soft snowgrass and a ribbon of white purslane. Choopa dropped off to sleep in a few moments, and dreams invaded his mind ...

He had reached the fabulous lake, and reached it when the moon was still above the Townsend Spur. Now, in his dreams, shafts of moonlight tracked the waters of the double lake, and sometimes it seemed as if small horses, with spangled fetlocks like Franz had made for him, were dancing on the moon-shafts across the water. In dreams he heard the music to which they danced. Immense happiness filled him as he slept.

Dandaloo slept contentedly beside him.

Choopa woke once and opened his eyes. A faint mist rose over the water and flowed up the bank. Sitting in the mist was the wallaby. Mist had brought him dreaming back. His paws were folded and a look of age-old wisdom was on his face. The secrets of the ice might be made clear to him ...

Wallabies had lived in the Snowy Mountains centuries before the brumbies had escaped from the white graziers' unfenced acres below the snow. Choopa knew that there were secrets which he must learn to understand before he could dance on the surface of the lake.

The moon had vanished, pale and white, behind the rocky outcrops of the Townsend Spur. A light-coloured bird flew up from the finger of land between

the two lakes; its harsh cry was the voice of a blue crane. Choopa tingled with excitement as that pale bird flew towards that first creeping light of the dawn.

It was time now, before the deep darkness that precedes the dawn, to go again to Charlotte Pass. Surely the music would be playing now.

Off Choopa and Dandaloo went, crossing the Snowy again and climbing up the rough Pass.

### Three

Silence; only the whispering leaves of those ancient snow gums on the crescent pass above the Snowy River and sometimes a weird wind howl from the rocks high up on Mount Stillwell. In the dense darkness before dawn, a shadow moved.

Choopa could not muffle his snort of fear. His blue roan hide was creeping. In imagination he saw himself galloping along the road, heading for home, *heard* his hoofbeats.

He did not gallop. Suddenly that shadow moved more definitely, became a huge stallion, then it was a rock again, and a snow-gum branch ... now a rock ...

A bright light appeared, in that building on the valley floor ... and a sound ... a sound floating on the air. There it was, the smooth swaying rhythm. Was Franz there? Could that shadow be a camel?

Choopa began dancing, just as he had that night when he first heard the music floating up on to the pass. He danced, even though he was trembling with fear. It was not the circus band playing for the camels. It was the same soft, mysterious music that had drifted up to the pass, long ago — the music which Franz loved, and to which Franz had taught him to waltz — or, in fact, was it the music that had made his legs, his whole body waltz, before Franz had taught him?

As he danced, Choopa forgot the menacing shadow. He was dancing there, encircled with snow gums, on the crescent pass — music and rhythm filled his mind and body. He knew that Dandaloo was standing there, pressed into the snow gums, and he began to realise that she was silently calling out to him, to stop him dancing away forever, into an unimaginable future.

At last he danced towards her, feeling the power of her silent calls.

It was Dandaloo who saw the shadow move out of the snow gums.

Choopa touched his nose to hers. He never saw the huge foreleg and hoof, never saw the blow coming, only felt himself being knocked sideways as he danced.

Dandaloo's scream of fury was not silent, and, as she screamed, she hurled herself at the enormous stallion that was no longer a shadow of rock and snow-gum branch. Dandaloo would fight for Choopa until the day she died. Her dancing, clowning dwarf was entirely beloved.

She did not wait for the immense stallion to gather himself together, but sprang at him again. She called out as she leapt, called out her own private call for Son of Storm.

Choopa had never heard her call this call before, but he was somehow not surprised when, as if out of the sky, the big, gentle brown stallion was there, answering Dandaloo's call quietly, before he grabbed the stranger by the neck and shook him fiercely.

Dandaloo gave a glad neigh of greeting, and Choopa mingled his greeting with hers. They were safe now, safe from shadows and enormous, unknown stallions, safe from clamouring secrets.

For Choopa, the gentle swaying sound of Franz's favourite waltz rose from the valley floor and drove away the painful throb of that stallion's blow to the side of his head.

Now Choopa really did hear galloping hooves sounding from along the hard road. The stranger stallion had fled from the fury of Dandaloo and the strength of Son of Storm, and the two were chasing him, driving him away from Dandaloo's beloved dwarf.

Occasionally Choopa heard Dandaloo give a scream of anger. Sometimes he heard a stallion's roar from Son of Storm.

The drumming hooves got further and further away, but the sweet music still rose up from the valley floor, and Choopa was dancing there, on Charlotte Pass, above the Snowy River, when Dandaloo and Son of Storm trotted back.

Choopa waltzed along the road to meet them when he heard them returning, and a blue crane rose from the banks of the Snowy and flew above them, almost invisible in the fading starlight, pale bird calling a greeting.

All the bush birds and animals were Choopa's friends, but he just wished that this crane would not seem to be following them.

But it was the crane that gave Choopa the idea of going down to the Snowy River just as dawn was breaking. As that bird flew overhead, he felt he must go — felt the same imperative call as he had earlier felt demanding he go to the double lake in the canyon.

As the first band of rose-and-gold appeared in the eastern sky over the Monaro, and that blue crane floated across the pass again, and the last sound of music died away, Choopa headed away, off the pass, through bushes and rocks down to that Snowy River that was like a pewter ribbon without one gleam of light from the faint dawn.

Choopa stumbled and fell, turning the fall into two or three somersaults. He was filled with joy; he had the music still sounding in his head, and surely he must be going to learn something from that rushing Snowy River.



At the river bank, he realised that the water at the crossing place was not deep enough to flow right over him, nor was it even as cold as that magical double lake's water which would have been ice in winter. The Snowy River would freeze to ice, too, and be covered deeply in snow, but now the water was snow melt, and moving very fast.

Choopa saw a wombat trundling down from the pass. Wombats were always his great friends, so he turned a somersault there on a little flat of snowgrass beside the foaming water.

The wombat stopped to watch, small eyes eager and bright. Choopa rose up on his hind legs and did a few dancing steps, and danced on into the river. He knew there were two or three flat-topped rocks just below the surface of the water, knew they were the first of a series of stepping stones. He danced on, over them, and then backed out onto the snowgrass again, and did another somersault especially to amuse the wombat.

As he stepped into the water again and onto the stepping stones, he saw a faint radiation mist wreath up off the river, and just then the first reflection of the dawn lit up that mist.

Choopa moved onto the third stone and was immediately wreathed around with mist. Cold tendrils touched him, but music still sounded in his mind. He rose in a courbette on his hind legs. The stone was slippery, but it was possible to dance as though he were dancing for Franz in that circus ring and the drops of Snowy River water that fell from his forefeet shone like the spangles which Franz had fastened to them a year ago.

Choopa neighed, proclaiming the beauty that he felt was his.

Dandaloo's neigh drifted down from the Charlotte Pass, saying that, to her, the blue-roan dwarf was a most beautiful horse.

There he was dancing in the great Snowy River, all silvered by a dawn-glowing radiation mist, and given some benediction by the river and by that music that still played on in his head.

Dandaloo and Son of Storm had traversed a little to the east for easier walking down the steep, rough side of the pass, so that now they were between the first rays of the rising sun and the dancing dwarf.

Dandaloo stopped and stood still simply gazing at the image which she saw. There was her last-born foal, encircled in a mist bow as he waltzed on the stepping stones. There were bright lights, too, making the whole picture an age-old symbol of a promise, or a secret. It was as though Choopa was contained in a shining mist halo.

Dandaloo, suddenly feeling very old, as old as the surrounding granite mountains, saw Choopa rearing and dancing, and saw him as something of a

great beauty imprinted on the air and on the place, as though he would be forever dancing there, near the source of the great Snowy River — the source of the legend.

Choopa, the little horse, looking up, could see his mother and Son of Storm against a dark band of snow gums. He could not see what else Dandaloo and Son of Storm saw — the only partly-lit bulk of that huge stallion, whom they had chased, just coming round a corner on the road above the river, as he came back, seeking Choopa.

Dandaloo would always remember Choopa dancing in the Snowy River, but linked to the brilliant vision would be that of the returning enormous stallion. That horse had a touch of red roan in his hide, and he was obviously very strong. Dandaloo *knew*, somehow, that he was set on finding Choopa — and there was Choopa dancing on the stepping stones in the Snowy River, as though just for that stallion to see and remember forever.

Son of Storm started to climb straight up on to Charlotte's Pass, aiming to intercept him on the road. Dandaloo just stood, watching Choopa, though looking up at Son of Storm and the huge roan horse drawing closer and closer together.

Then the roan was no longer there.

Dandaloo began to follow Son of Storm immediately. She had realised the scare value in her furious onslaught and her screams.

Both Choopa and the entranced wombat seemed oblivious to any drama. After a while, the wombat bumbled his way closer to the water and had a drink, then he started slowly up the pass again, looking back constantly at the blue roan dancing in that river mist.

Only the wombat saw first Son of Storm and then Dandaloo disappear off the road.

At last sounds came down through the river mist from the area of the road and, suddenly, Dandaloo's furious screams. Choopa heard it and dropped to his four feet, spun round on his flat rock, and looked up in the direction of the screaming. Then he set off, up to the pass, to join the other two.

Just then, Choopa saw the roan stallion seem to rise up out of an invisible gully below the road. Dandaloo and Son of Storm were at his heels, both of them snapping and biting and screaming.

Choopa knew he could be of no help, and he was not even thinking that the big stallion was really seeking him. He hurried, wishing his legs were longer. Then there was a thundering and a thumping and more screaming and roaring ... All three burst out of some thick heather bushes, and they were all coming straight for Choopa.

No time to think.

Always, before this, his clown-like somersaults had saved him. No place to clown around on this rough, steep slope. He flung himself into a somersault that landed him under a thick, heath bush which was only just big enough to hide a dwarf.

Even though it was still cold, early morning, the scent of those tiny white stars enfolded him. It was as though he was playing there above the Snowy River with Bri Bri again — though she would, now, be so much bigger than he.

Choopa was sobbing for breath. The roan went galloping, stumbling, past him, and Son of Storm shot past, too, but Dandaloo stopped beside his hiding place and peered under the bush, nosing him gently.

She stayed with him there, until Son of Storm came back, much later, looking for her.

Son of Storm had chased the strawberry roan a long way, until that big horse had turned, crossed the river, and then gone up and up, till he stood on the Divide. Then he had gone thundering, falling and rolling down the other side. Son of Storm had stood watching him going down what was a great, precipitous gully that seemed never to end, nor did it seem to have a floor. When the big horse vanished from sight, Son of Storm left and returned to Dandaloo and Choopa.

A nankeen kestrel was hovering over the Great Geehi Gorge, its breast glittering silver in the early sunlight. It would tell the tale forever, so that every bush bird and animal would know how the gentle Son of Storm had chased the big red roan onto the Divide, and then down and *down*. And the kestrel would also have seen there by the little waterfall on the creek the tiny jewel of the red roan's herd, a perfectly formed, but miniature, filly, who stood watching her sire come rolling and sliding down the last remaining snowdrift in that steep gully.

The kestrel stored everything he saw in his memory. He saw that filly, no bigger than a snowflake, and touched with pink, like the snow is, in spring, touched with wind-borne dust; he saw her step back in behind some rocks as though she did not wish to be seen watching that undignified descent.

The kestrel continued to hover and see all that was to be seen. He would be able to create a wonderful bush legend that would grow and grow as it spread through the mountain forests. Currawongs would turn it into a song. Lyrebirds would mimic it. Sacred kingfishers would carry it with them up north. Rainbow birds would take it with them over Torres Strait.

Now Choopa went wandering back to the Snowy River. Perhaps he might recapture an elusive secret if he drank the water once more. Perhaps if he went up, over the Divide to the double lake again ...?

On the bank of the Snowy he lay down to sleep. What was it that the kestrel had called? Something about a miniature filly, daughter of the strawberry roan? The jewel of his whole herd ... no bigger than a snowflake and as beautiful ...?

Dandaloo watched him and then lay down on the sweet, soft snowgrass, and folded her legs beneath her. She did not sleep peacefully. What if the strawberry roan had come for Choopa — what then? No wonderful clowning somersaults and dancing would preserve the little dwarf from that aggressive horse.

Choopa woke, and Dandaloo knew, by the way he started up and arched his neck, that he had been dreaming that he was big and tall, a strong stallion.

And that was so.

Choopa had woken from dreams of perfection, but at the same time he knew that no big, tall, strong stallion was ever befriended by wallabies, echidnas, or wombats, nor could a big stallion turn such somersaults as he, that charmed herds of brumbies so that they all loved him.

If that big roan stallion confronted him, he would just have to do all his tricks most beautifully — as though Franz were watching, and the music playing.

Calling to Dandaloo and Son of Storm, Choopa set off up the river to a shallower crossing place. They would spend the night at the double lake after crossing the Divide at the Northcote Pass, above the Canyon.

Son of Storm went along happily. They would be far enough away from that great western gully down which the strawberry roan had blundered, galloped, stumbled, and rolled, to be quite safe. Anyway, he thought, Old Strawberry might not be feeling too wonderful.

Old Strawberry was not. He had picked himself up at the bottom of the snowdrift. He was on almost the only flat place in all that steep gully below Sentinel Peak — and he could see that beautiful miniature daughter of his standing where she must have seen his whole undignified descent. She looked as if she thought it very funny.

The tiny filly was beautiful, indeed, almost white like snow, so they called her Jounama, but her ears were touched with strawberry roan, and there were strawberry parts on her fine legs, and her mane and tail were brushed lightly with pale roan. Who could have anything as perfect in their herd? Then he thought of that ugly blue-roan dwarf, and thought how it had better keep away. Never had Strawberry seen anything so weird ... and *dancing*! It should never have survived. If he, Old Strawberry, ever saw the blue-roan dwarf again, *he* would make sure it no longer survived!

While the last rays of sunset were in the sky above the deep gully, Old Strawberry lay down and slept.

As the sun set, the scent of eucalyptus leaves, of Alpine ash trees, that grow in the gullies below the great rock crags, came drifting up the Canyon. The three brumbies at the double lake in the Northcote Canyon slept too, undisturbed by any wild thoughts blowing through from the stallion further along the western escarpment of the Snowy Mountains.

## Four

The strawberry roan's sleep was very disturbed. He had never before been chased by an angry, screaming mare. Never before had a stallion given him such a beating as that given him by Son of Storm ... and that ridiculous, bumping, bouncing, rolling, slithering descent of the steep gully still rankled in his mind, so that his sleep was not peaceful. He woke hours before dawn and, without a real plan in his mind as to what he would do when he got up on to the Divide, he set off up the steep slope.

He found it very difficult to climb up again because he kept slipping and sliding back down on his flanks. He got off the snowdrift onto snowgrass, but then he found that the grass was almost impossible to climb, too ... the ground beneath the grass was frozen, hard as rocks, and every time he took a step his hoof slipped back. He even fell and slid down, enveloped in a cloud of flying frost.

Then, in the dawn sky, he saw that kestrel. It had been joined by two brown hawks whose wild cries seemed to be taking up the kestrel's story, and were now loudly reporting on his effort to climb up the steep gully below The Sentinel.

It was *his* gully, and he wished they would all be quiet and vanish away.

The brown hawks flew southward, along the western face of the Range. Only birds of the air could go *across* the western face. Man or horse could only loop the ridges and gullies. Up a ridge ... down a gully. Not even skiers, who, on a steep snow face would appear to have the gift of wings, can cut across the western face's chasms and cliffs.

Strawberry did not know where the screaming mare and the strong brown stallion had gone ... or that dwarf who was probably with them ... but he was sure that, wherever they were, they would hear the brown hawks' description of the silly stallion that was trying to climb out of the gully, below The Sentinel. If they came to find him, instead of his finding them, they would slide and slide down the Sentinel gully. It was much more slippery than it had been the afternoon before.

Ice must have come in the night.

The kestrel went along with the swift brown hawks, across the crags and cliffs of that precipitous western scarp. Then they zoomed across the knife-cut of Little Austria, and were below the walls of the Canyon. They called as they went

— calls that would wake even exhausted, deeply sleeping brumbies.

Choopa heard the hawks in his sleep and half-woke. He had been dreaming, and in his dream he was as tall and strong as that strawberry roan, swifter too, and his legs did not swing on to the side, tripping him, but he could still somersault, still leap and dance, still do Franz's airs-above-the-ground, so that the strawberry roan stallion would be amazed, and not try to kill him.

Suddenly he became wide awake and there, on the hillside above him, outlined by dawn, he saw that roan stallion.

Old Strawberry had succeeded in climbing that gully, and had gone along the Divide until he was above the Canyon ... hovering there were the brown hawks.

Because Choopa was still in his dream, he imagined himself a tall, full-grown stallion. He threw up his head, arched his neck and neighed a trumpeting stallion neigh, then sprang forward. He felt his hooves sliding instead of biting into snowgrass and granular soil. There was a strange, tinkling, slithering sound.

The sun just topped Carruther's Peak and Mount Lee. In a few seconds, the brilliant beams of the dawn had come down the back of Mount Lee, reaching the slope on which Old Strawberry stood, and that slope was shining like glass.

Choopa took another leap forward, landed and slipped backwards. There was the same slithering sound, and as Strawberry took a step forward little discs of ice, golden light round their rims, flew and slid from his hooves.

Strawberry's snorting fear blew the discs faster. Choopa stood still in amazement. He heard Dandaloo and Son of Storm stirring from sleep behind him. He did not want them to wake yet. If he could climb the slippery slope, he wanted this fight to be his. *He* would repay that dizzying blow on the head that Strawberry had given him, and then drive Strawberry up to the Divide, and down into the steep gully.

Little discs of ice flew from his hooves as he went springing up the slope. Shining ice slipped away from every sliding step that Strawberry took towards him. The tinkling, rustling world was a-gleam and a-glitter. It was also moving.

Strawberry could see Choopa below him — just a dwarf trying to climb up the bright ice — and Strawberry felt a longing to destroy. He began to slither and slide down the slope, but he did not trumpet his rage as he might have, because he could see Son of Storm and that virago of a mare were waking.

The front of Choopa's hooves bit through the frost, but barely cut into the frozen earth. He did not slip or slide backwards very much. To Choopa it seemed as if he, himself, was big and strong, a fierce fighter. It was he who trumpeted angrily.

Son of Storm and Dandaloo heard him, and both thought that perhaps they should get a little closer to the action — if there were action — so they, too,

started slowly up the ice-coated slope, but they both understood how much Choopa wanted to fight that roan, how much he wanted to avenge that savage blow on the side of his head.

Though knowing full well that the little dancing dwarf had no chance of damaging that big, strong horse, they wanted him to go on believing he could. His fight should not be taken from him. They did not hurry, but they did watch closely.

As the blue roan dwarf and the red roan stallion got closer together, and both were hurrying as best they could, Son of Storm and Dandaloo saw the flurry of flying frost crystals as the two roans — large and small — got closer together. Then they stood still and watched.

They saw Choopa make a rush at Old Strawberry and then dance away to the side; Strawberry followed clumsily. Choopa sprang at him, then cheerfully danced away. This went on over and over again.

Dandaloo could see Choopa's plan. If he could, he would lead Strawberry to the edge of the lake, but what then?

Choopa had explored the lake very thoroughly when he was there a year ago, and he knew they were very close to the place where the stony shelf was very narrow before it dropped off into deep, freezing water, where centuries ago ice had remained, summer and winter, even after its parent glacier had gone.

Dandaloo and Son of Storm watched every manoeuvre Choopa made, every move that forced Strawberry in the direction in which he, Choopa, wanted him to go.

Dandaloo knew that the shelf was narrow just there.

There was something else that no one, only Old Strawberry, knew.

The two dodging, springing, striking horses moved ever closer to the verge of the lake.

Then, right at the edge of the water, Choopa leapt to one side, and somersaulted back behind Strawberry. The big, red roan teetered, for a moment, on the rim of the shelf, looked around at the clowning little dwarf — and fell with a large splash into the lake.

Choopa rose on his hind legs, saluting the roan stallion who had sunk and come up again, angry and spluttering. Strawberry had fallen into the lake exactly where Choopa had meant him to — at the place where there was very little shelf — so he had nothing on which to get out.

Dandaloo and Son of Storm both realised that Choopa had deliberately led the big roan to the particular part of the lake where there was almost no shallow shelf. Now the other thing that no-one — except perhaps Strawberry — knew, became apparent, as Strawberry, floundering furiously, tried to scramble out of



the lake.

Choopa stepped closer, to peer down into the clear water, and the shale under his hooves gave way. With a little snort of amusement, he went head first into the icy glacial lake, knocking Strawberry off his foothold on the shelf.

Choopa turned and swam swiftly to the place where he knew he could climb out. Strawberry, scrambling again, sank and came up.

Choopa, swimming hard as he was, could tell that Strawberry was one of very few horses that could not, or would not, swim.

In his floundering struggles, Strawberry seemed to follow Choopa, and where Choopa could scramble ashore, Strawberry found footholds and scrambled, too.

Somehow they all — Choopa, Dandaloo, and Son of Storm — could see that Old Strawberry's aggressive wish to destroy had gone, at least for the moment.

It was Son of Storm who decided that it would be best if Strawberry went back to his own bingle, and started to drive him up towards Carruther's Peak, knowing he would be almost at the Divide. Perhaps, once there, he would have to go down that steep gully below the Sentinel.

Because Choopa deeply did not want to leave the high country, when Son of Storm returned from driving Strawberry up towards the Divide, the three of them started to graze on some sunlit grass.

Choopa was determined to see that steep gully above Old Strawberry's home, but he stayed with Dandaloo and Son of Storm.

The blue crane, that Choopa had first seen at the Townsend Spur, came back that night and flew round and round, over Choopa, as though with a strange tale to tell. Choopa, Son of Storm and Dandaloo all noted her slow wing beat. It was obvious that she had travelled a long way.

Choopa was lying in the shelter of a great rock, but he got up onto his feet, acknowledging that the crane might have some sort of message. No trees grew around the lake, not a branch on which a crane could alight and rest, and Choopa knew that a bird of the heron family could not hover like a kestrel.

This blue crane had been near them since they reached the double lake. Then, at the Snowy River, the kestrel had seemed to take over and always be near as the carrier of tales ... the kestrel, the all-seeing eye above the Geehi Gorge.

Perhaps the blue crane with the harsh voice had flown in company with the kestrel, spreading the tale of what had happened in the gully below Sentinel Peak.

The kestrel, of course, saw and reported what was truth. The blue crane was

a gossip, and by the time she got back to Lake Albina she was too exhausted to be able quite to remember what had happened in Sentinel gully. She knew the kestrel had seen Old Strawberry sliding on a snowdrift. In fact, she herself had seen him picking himself up at the waterfall in the creek in Sentinel Gully, but the news she was bursting to tell was that she had seen the tiny filly — ‘the jewel of Old Strawberry’s herd’. The kestrel said she was his pride.

Choopa listened and barely understood all he was hearing about the ‘jewel’, of fabulous, miniature beauty.

He was miniature too, but the only time he was a fabulous beauty was when he danced his airs-above-the-ground for Franz, with a spotlight on his fetlocks all roped around with spangles. People cheered, then — as he danced in the circus ring — as if he was a fabulous beauty.

Choopa put his head down on the soft snowgrass. If he’d been a dog he would have howled. There were tears in his eyes when Dandaloo and Son of Storm walked over to him, and Dandaloo bent and rubbed her face into his and snuffled at his ears. Then she gently nipped Son of Storm before she snuffled at Choopa again. Choopa knew she was asking Son of Storm for protection of her dwarf son. Really, there was no need to ask Son of Storm. From the moment he had peered in moonlight at Dandaloo’s ugly little newborn foal, Son of Storm had helped her protect him.

How was Son of Storm to know he had fathered this foal? Dandaloo belonged to a very big, fierce stallion who had a large herd that mostly ran on Quambat Flat. Surely, Dandaloo had taken him along with her and Choopa over the high tops. Surely, he and Dandaloo were very close friends. Surely, Son of Storm admired Choopa’s courage — this beautiful, brave, dancing dwarf. He gave the nearest little ear a gentle nip as though he were making a promise of friendship and protection forever.

The little horse sighed again and rubbed his head on the good snowgrass. Dandaloo and Son of Storm lay down beside him, Dandaloo’s mane touching his ear. In the dark of the night, an owl flew over, calling as it looked down on the three sleepers — the big brown stallion, the small, old roan mare, and her dwarf roan, two years old — all sleeping close enough to touch each other.

So the owl saw them lying there by the lake, and he saw Strawberry climbing up again onto the Divide, and the owl’s story added on to the kestrel’s. Some of each tale got altered and twisted, but basically the tale that got around somehow simply left all the animals wondering.

## Five

Choopa got up in the dark of the night to go after Old Strawberry. Dandaloo knew immediately he woke, and she got up quickly and followed him, nudging Son of Storm to come too. Strawberry would be far too cunning to let a tadpole like Choopa lead him into a deep, freezing lake again. Strawberry would punish him.

She hurried forward in the dark.

Both Choopa and Dandaloo knew that a cluster of big rocks was on top of the first ridge they were climbing. It was possible that Strawberry might be resting among them. Choopa stopped and peered at the rocks through the starlight. After all, one of the rocks up near the top of the pass where he was dancing to the music that came up from the valley had suddenly become Strawberry, and given him that blow to his head. Choopa shook his white-blotched blue head as he thought of it.

That blow had to be avenged. He moved a few steps closer to those rocks that overlooked the Canyon and the opposite slopes above his lake.

Dandaloo and Son of Storm crept after him.

The stars seemed to shine brightly and the night air was tingling. Choopa took in a freezing breath. Suddenly the cold night air seemed to enfold him. He looked round to make sure that Dandaloo and Son of Storm were close. Something *must* be going to happen. If the air was so very cold, Strawberry might become coated with ice.

Then, one of the rocks moved ... and Strawberry stepped out of the whole rock cluster.

Choopa stood still as though he were frozen.

Not one hair moved on Dandaloo. Nothing must tell Strawberry that they were there.

Strawberry never looked in their direction. He instead went up the ridge to get on to the Divide. Choopa headed silently down the shallow gully that led to Little Austria and, on the far side of it, up towards Carruther's Peak. Soon they would see the heavy silhouette of Strawberry pacing along the Divide and they would follow quietly.

Sure enough, the big strong horse appeared above them on the skyline, walking along the quite narrow Divide, then he was going over the pointed top

of Mount Lee, where a curled-over cornice of snow always hung in the winter.

Choopa, and Dandaloo and Son of Storm, followed him. Dandaloo looked back because she was sure something could be following them. She could not see anything, and just along the narrow Divide, there were no rocks to look like brumbies hiding.

As they got nearer to the top of Carruther's, Choopa slowed down and walked more carefully. He knew that on the eastern side there was a straight drop into Club Lake. He had no wish to be as wet as Old Strawberry, and Club Lake, directly below, was another very deep glacial lake. The more he thought of that tremendous drop into Club Lake, the more carefully he put his feet on the ice-glazed shelf.

Dandaloo called him to come away quietly; the very direct descent into the Lake was dangerous.

From there they followed Old Strawberry over the top of Carruther's Peak. Dandaloo looked suspiciously at some of the groups of flat rocks near the summit. There could be a strange horse lying among them.

Choopa, with every hair on his hide standing on end, looked carefully, too. Nothing was there, but his hide was still creeping cold as he walked on.

Son of Storm had quickened his stride. Choopa knew they must be getting near to the top of the Sentinel gully. In fact, he could see the peak of the Sentinel against the stars, and a wild excitement flowed through him.

The truth of some secrets had been promised him that he had not learnt of yet ... tingling, he did a few graceful dancing steps.

Then they saw Strawberry turn down over the edge into the steep gully. He seemed to walk with ease, digging his hooves into the snowgrass. The gully was very precipitous. The three watchers, peering through a dark night in which the brilliance of the stars gave little visibility, could see the steepness and marvel at it. No wonder Old Strawberry had slipped and slithered and rolled down it when Son of Storm had chased him over the edge. The kestrel had mentioned a snowdrift at the bottom of the gully.

Choopa had learned to slide down fairly steep snow in his first winter, far south of their usual grazing grounds. Now he tried to imagine sliding on his back down anything as steep as this gully; imagine the speed he would reach.

Then, *then*, quite unexpectedly, Old Strawberry announced that he was rejoining his herd. He had a distinctive, deep call, deep, but resonant. Now he called loudly from halfway down the gully, and his neigh echoed off the sides of the funnel, echoed off the Sentinel, off Carruther's Peak above them.

As the herd below began to answer, the echoing neighs rolled all around, and Choopa shivered. He had never heard anything like it — a weird cacophony of

echoing neighs and dingo howls, all filling the gully and going around them. Dandaloo shivered, too, but Son of Storm reared up and screamed a challenge.

In a moment all the echoes died away, dying, dying, dying. It was then that the dingoes began long, drawn-out howls to slide between and into the echoes; wild and free came the cries of the bush and the mountain, rolling around the star-struck slopes of the Divide.

This time Choopa, too, reared in a perfect courbette, and threw his call to the highest mountains. Little roan dwarf, he threw his call to a secret that he knew existed but which he did not understand. Balanced on his hind legs, he called to the whole world, then he dropped to his four feet again, rubbed his head against Dandaloo, and stepped over the brink.

The funnel below seemed even darker as the echo from his own call rolled around and around. An answer came, thrilling, beautiful ...

Just as he was wondering how to get down that steep funnel, he saw a wombat at his feet, and the faint sign of a track going across the slope. The wombat turned back, nudged one of Choopa's forelegs, and then started along that faint track.

Choopa followed the trundling wombat. The barely visible track went right across the head of the funnel, then looped around on the slopes of The Sentinel and turned back across the gully, only much lower. If the track went on going back and forth, back and forth across the gully, lower each time, it would finally get to the bottom, and Choopa meant to get right down. The wombat kept looking back, willing him to follow.

Strawberry neighed again, and the mares' neighs blended with his. He was almost down with his herd. Choopa hurried, stepping up closer behind his wombat guide. Wombat looked back rather crossly, having no wish to be trodden on or pushed from behind.

Choopa was quite exhausted by the time they reached his beloved double lake, and he lay down to sleep on the snowgrass bank, beside Dandaloo. The bank was very cold because a long-lasting snowdrift had lain there. The Alpine marsh marigold had been flowering beneath the icy fringe of the drift and some were still in full bloom, there below Choopa's head.

Their scent enfolded him and his dreams.

Realising how exhausted he was, and how soundly sleeping, Dandaloo got up and stood over him to protect him from whatever might come ... she was sure there was danger somewhere close.

Though Choopa's eyes were tightly shut, he was seeing his beloved double lake and the opposite bank where mist curled faintly, and there were two white colts, and Jounama, the filly more beautiful than a flake of snow, galloping,

bucking and playing — flitting ghosts. All three like drifting flakes across his dreams. White foals galloping, bucking, rearing.

The three small horses were only foals, far younger than Choopa; they were not fully-grown dwarfs, as he was. Or was there one ... one that seemed older and perhaps a dwarf?

Choopa drowsed, his dreams full of playful white foals with whom he would have loved to join in. He could teach them how to somersault, teach them airs-above-the-ground, as Franz had taught him. What fun it would be to be dancing with other young horses. And he could hear Franz's music flowing in his head, feel the swaying rhythm in his feet, feel his muscles contracting for a perfect levade.

One day he would dance over the surface of the beautiful double lake. Every time he saw that place in his dream, the surrounding mountains were covered in snow and the lake was solid ice, as it had been so long ago, so long ago.

Why did he feel there were secrets of those long ago years?

He rubbed the side of his head on the snowgrass, smelt the faint scent of the creamy-coloured stars that grew there, where the drift had lain. That scent rose all around him as Dandaloo pushed her blue head up against his.

In his dream, the young horses played around them and the sweet scent was all-enfolding.

Choopa and Dandaloo slept; starlight touched the five point, scented waxen stars. The dream of the young horses blended into a miracle of scent and stars.

## Six

Before dawn light touched Carruther's Peak and began to slide down the western slopes, Choopa's eyelids flickered open. There above the valley, in the cleft of Little Austria, was the menacing silhouette of the strawberry roan stallion.

The menace and threat were all directed towards Choopa. He was wide awake instantly and the fear that raced through him was also for the beautiful young horses that were playing all around him, all around the double lake.

Then the stallion neighed his deep-throated call and one of the playing young ones — a filly, who seemed older — stopped in mid-gallop and listened.

The kestrel had said there was a filly, the jewel of Old Strawberry's herd, more beautiful than a flake of snow and no bigger.

All of those young horses were as beautiful as flakes of snow ... two white colts with strange coloured eyes, and Jounama the filly, with forelock, mane and tail threaded with strawberry-coloured hairs.

Choopa waited to see if the jewel filly would go to her father, or if Old Strawberry would come down.

Dandaloo, awake, aware of some danger in the air, waited too. The beautiful young horses racing and bucking ... the older one, perhaps a dwarf ... it was all interesting. Dandaloo was wondering what would happen next. She did not expect Choopa to make the next move, but Choopa shook himself and got slowly to his feet, just when the young gallopers gathered together and suddenly encircled Choopa, blotting him from Strawberry's view for a moment.

Dandaloo realised it was lucky that Choopa had a moment or so in which to gather his thoughts together before Strawberry saw him. She was certain that Old Strawberry had not given up.

Choopa did not waste that moment. He stood there, flexing his muscles, filling his lungs as Franz had taught him, breathing in the scent of those five-star flowers and of the double lake, and looking at the three young horses who stood grouped together: two little white colts, exactly similar, and the filly with strawberry roan on each ear. Then he burst into a gallop, went straight through the group, seemed to stumble, and did three somersaults up a steep slope to rest towards where Old Strawberry stood, throwing another unanswered neigh.

Something must happen now, Dandaloo thought, and sure enough Old Strawberry began to thunder down the slope towards her clowning dwarf.

Dandaloo gave a scream and galloped towards Choopa. Old Strawberry heard that screaming mare — and stopped in his stride, sliding in the snowgrass.

Choopa seized that moment to rise in a courbette and dance as he had danced with the camels, and the stars shone onto his legs and hooves as though he wore spangles. Just as he had done in the circus ring, Choopa felt that he looked beautiful and he carried himself with beauty and strength and immense confidence, though his only audience was Old Strawberry, the three young horses, one wombat and an owl.

There was sudden quiet. The three young ones ceased their galloping, bucking and rearing, and simply stood and watched the wonderful show of dancing which Choopa was giving.

Old Strawberry stood stock-still, too, and uttered no sound until the little filly, his daughter, more beautiful than a snowflake, began to move closer to Choopa, then Strawberry trumpeted his call to her, to come to him.

Choopa heard his call and started Franz's airs-above-the-ground, and he moved with greater perfection than he had ever done before. If only his hooves were spangled it would have been the most glittering performance the little dwarf had ever done. Even the brilliant stars seemed to stand still.

Breathless at last, Choopa stood firmly on the snowgrass, and suddenly the young gallopers galloped around him and forced him to join in. Round and round they all went, above the magic lake.

Choopa, galloping, somersaulted immediately.

It was more fun, even, than playing with all his young animal friends on Quambat Flat. It was just what he had always wanted — splendid games with other young horses ... And was there that one, older than the others, who was a dwarf like himself?

Old Strawberry must be made to go. Choopa led the others to force Strawberry back up onto the Divide, then the young ones galloped back to the lake again.

Dandaloo, settling down to sleep, saw the blue and white wave galloping down off to her side, and she sighed because there was Choopa playing the way he should, with other young ones, and one no bigger than himself.

She sighed and dropped off to sleep, with a last picture in her mind of her beautiful, graceful son in a levade against the stars, and little white animals all around like small ghosts, as light and airy as the white windflowers that grow out of the last drifts of snow.

There were the little ghosts galloping off and around Choopa as he did his airs-above-the-ground.

And Dandaloo slept, wrapped in happiness, for her son was with friends. The



streaked reflections of the stars moved like magic over the double lake.

## Seven

When the stars were still in the sky, the small ghosts had left. Only Old Strawberry stood on the Divide, looking over, wondering whether he should gallop down and give a thrashing to that conceited blue roan dwarf.

But, Dandaloo woke and saw the shape of Old Strawberry trotting around the lake. Before he got close enough to see her lying there, Dandaloo had crept between two big rocks.

Eventually she slept again.

The threat-filled image of Old Strawberry did not invade her dreams. All she saw, as she slept, was her beloved Choopa playing with the two white foals and the small filly, as beautiful as a flake of snow. Choopa playing joyously with other young horses as he should have been able to all the years of his young life. Choopa, so happy that he looked perfect and beautiful.

Everything might be well now, but who knew? For in the Snowy Mountains, nothing was certain — a storm could come out of the blue.

Those white foals were too young to be far from their mothers, and if their mothers came, she thought, there could be trouble.

What was it that the kestrel had told everyone in the mountains? The jewel of Strawberry's herd? His daughter, as small and as beautiful as a flake of snow? And touched with the rose colour of spring — wind-dust on spring snow?

Dandaloo and her son, Choopa, were two blue roans, blotched with white — blue roan, the colour of the sky when reflected on the deep cold waters of a glacial lake.

Dandaloo suspected there might still be a huge block of ice as part of the double lake, and like Choopa, she had wondered what secrets that lake might hold.

Once upon a time, great sheets of ice moved down this canyon. On the other side of the Divide, glaciers moved slowly into the fabled Snowy River. Further south still, the Crackenback River had once had several steep glaciers creeping down into it, tumbling rocks in the river bed, freezing bodies of whatever animals lived in the mountains then.

Dandaloo lived — and survived — by a credo of 'sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof'. After all, fierce-screaming mare though she could be, it was not always easy to survive or to make sure Choopa survived.

She peered through her rock walls and could see Old Strawberry standing, bewildered, on the grass border of the lake ... sufficient unto the day ... she should remain quiet. There was no sign of Choopa or the other young animals, and she could not go searching for them while Old Strawberry stood there.

In fact, Choopa was standing on Carruther's Peak, also waiting to see what would happen next. It was Fate's turn to move, in this game of life and death.

The young ones were having rough games beside him. It really was no place to play — Club Lake was directly under the precipitous eastern slopes. Choopa rounded up the three young ones and brought them back to safer ground. There he stayed, stamping his forefeet if they tried to move.

Just as it seemed as if he could hold them, fascinated, by dancing in front of them and holding their eyes, there was the sound of Strawberry's imperious 'come here' trumpet.

Choopa stood still for one moment and took his eyes off the young ones — and the filly burst past him, switched around to go to her father's call, lost her footing and began to tumble down towards the slopes above Club Lake. She was still upright, but going very fast and out of control towards cliffs and rocks, only remaining upright if she kept going.

Choopa shot off after her, and soon Old Strawberry was after her too — a mad chase in which not one of them could stop, and in which a fall would mean a long free descent ending in the Club Lake. And could, indeed, mean death.

The slopes surrounding Club Lake, when covered in snow, were known as the steepest ski slopes in the Main Range. Somehow they almost seemed vertical.

Choopa knew he was only just succeeding in keeping on his feet. He must not stumble, no place to somersault there! Even if he tucked his head in, like an echidna, he could be killed.

He was looking where he was going, placing his feet with all possible care, but also watching that tiny filly on ahead. Suddenly she caught a hoof in a piece of shale and seemed to fly through the air. Her other hooves kicked up the blooms of white everlasting that grow across the top of Carruther's, so that there was a cloud of little white flowers following her.

She vanished over an edge.

Choopa tried and tried to stop, but he couldn't. The enormous force of gravity was pulling him to the brink of the cliff over which the filly had gone.

He knew he must not fall, must keep on his feet. He dug in and clung on with his hooves and tried to keep upright; sharp shale dug into the frog of one hoof. He gathered his muscles to try to jump upwards. One white everlasting hit him on the nose, then he was flying through air.

He was on his side, falling, falling. Then one shoulder hit a heap of rock. He pulled his legs up under his belly, heard his own breath sobbing, forced his eyes open, caught a fleeting glimpse of the filly falling through space below him. The fading stars of the dawn sky seemed to reflect on water, far below.

Then space engulfed him, held him, as he fell fast. It seemed to Choopa that he heard a sound. Every one of his blue or white hairs tingled. He forced his eyes open again. That faintly starlit water was close, but something had broken its mirror surface in ripples — that sound ...? Maybe he would hit the water soon himself?

Then something broke the surface, rose up out of it ... that filly ...? Engulfed in space, with air rushing by, he succeeded in letting out a neigh, but there was no answer. Whatever rose up in the lake sank again.

Choopa knew he was desperate. How hard could he hit water without being smashed ...? Better be an echidna, and tuck his head right under his chest ...

He did not hear the sound or the splash. This lake must have solid ice below it, too. This cold was like an iron band. Water, aching water was filling his ears and nose. He began to struggle ...

He bobbed up just near where the filly had surfaced. She sank again, but he was swimming strongly. Up came the filly's head and her pink-tipped ears just beside him.

Choopa opened his mouth and shipped a lot of water, but gathered in her mane and held on with clenched teeth and neck muscles straining. He could see the edge of the lake and began steering towards it.

Then he saw Old Strawberry coming carefully down the slope above the water.

He was not limping or streaming blood, so he must have got down without falling. He would be ready for violence.

Choopa could only think of holding the filly's head out of the water, and steering her to the bank. There might be a shallow shelf like in Lake Albina, but what then?

What then?

Choopa dug in with the tips of his hooves at the edge and tightened his grip on the filly, pulling with all the strength in his neck and shoulders till he landed her onto the bank well above the water. He collapsed on the ground beside her, quite exhausted.

There stood Old Strawberry, not far away.

Dandaloo, far above, peered over the edge of the steep slopes and cliffs. She had seen the filly's fall and flight through air, then, to her horror, saw Choopa's mad race downwards, his battle to keep on his feet and upright, saw him fly

through the air over the edge.

Now she saw Old Strawberry start to move towards Choopa.

## Eight

The stars had already lost their brilliance. It would soon be the black dark before the first dawn light. There were no stars, now, to be reflected in the dark, dark waters of Club Lake.

It was becoming difficult for the old blue roan mare to see the best way to go down that very steep slope off Carruther's ridge towards the cliffs that drop sheer into Club Lake.

Dandaloo tested each foothold before she put her weight on it. She could hear splashing down below, but could not see anything in that dark pool that seemed to reach up towards her. Choopa *must* be down there, and she was certain he was alive. Old Strawberry was somehow down there, too, alive or dead.

Dandaloo went doggedly on. At last she sent a gentle call to Choopa, throwing her voice down into the dark, down into that deep, black hollow.

The answer that came back had a weird echo off the water and off the surrounding rock walls, but it conveyed without doubt that Choopa was glad to know she was nearby.

She called again, but mingled with his answer was a furious trumpet that simply had to be Old Strawberry's.

A cold shiver crept over Dandaloo's blue hide — and down below, in the dark black water, a cold shiver crept through Choopa — though already he was frozen from his long efforts to drag the filly from the water.

Dandaloo could barely see the steep slope on which she was treading; all was black dark. She peered into the blackness where she knew Club Lake would be. Her eyes stung with the effort to see something and she rubbed her eyes on her forelegs, suddenly feeling forlorn and alone. She heard a splash and for a moment, it seemed as if two lissom white ghosts floated into her vision, way down below. They were not two longed-for visions of Choopa; they were very small ghosts, quite white. Perhaps they were those two motherless white foals who had appeared all of a sudden at Lake Albina, and had been like March flies attached to Old Strawberry. It seemed as if they were *flying* down the cliffs that form one side of Club Lake. Even bewitched, they surely could not fly? Were they foals really? She remembered their strange eyes. They had no mother. Where had they come from?

Dandaloo kept on creeping, one leg after the other, on two, three, four, down that steep shaly slope. Once she stumbled, and slid a few trotting steps to keep her balance, and to stop falling.

She realised there was something or someone close behind her. She got her balance again and turned her head to look behind. One shape she could barely see, and another shape which was surely a white mane.

The stars twinkled once and went out. Once they were reflected in the waters of Club Lake, and Dandaloo could see that it was still a long way below her. She stood for a few seconds, but she had to go on. She had to find Choopa and get him back to Lake Albina, and finally back to Quambat Flat.

Perhaps she should call Son of Storm again? Make that secret call that could be heard over mountains and valleys. Son of Storm could not be far away. She *must* call, and she did call.

She kept creeping on down into that abyss of black dark where Choopa and Old Strawberry were both engulfed in the heavy darkness.

At last she heard a soft whiffling sound. She stopped stock-still and answered Son of Storm, and waited to feel his warm touch.

When he was standing beside her, she threw a call down to Choopa again. Son of Storm threw his gentle greeting, too, but as Strawberry's trumpeting challenge rang out, he threw a fierce challenge back. Had not he, Son of Storm, given Old Strawberry quite a beating? That big, blundering, bullying stallion had better not forget it!

Together the old mare and the gentle brown stallion walked carefully down the steep slope above Club Lake.

Dandaloo's knees were aching, and her shins too, the slope was so steep. She tried angling across it, but that was not good. There was a small snowgrass shelf on which she could rest. She stopped and peered down into the dark abyss again. Yes, there were Choopa and the snowflake filly, lying close together. They must both be nearly frozen. She must get to Choopa.

Choopa knew that Dandaloo was coming, knew Son of Storm was with her, but first of all he had to get the snowflake filly further away from the water and then drive Strawberry right away.

He could not even sigh with relief when he felt solid rock under his hooves. His jaws were clamped tight on the filly's mane as he pulled her with him.

He was also stiff with cold.

At last he began to climb away from the water and pull the filly onto the rocky bank. It was then that the dark bulk of Strawberry loomed in front of him, but also then that two white lissom ghosts flitted into the black dark.

Those white foals had acted like March flies, nipping and darting at

Strawberry. They might again ...

Choopa tugged and pulled at the filly. Strawberry came closer to the edge — he was snorting angrily. Didn't he understand that Choopa was saving that miniature, beautiful filly of whom he was so proud? Perhaps he only thought that the blue roan dwarf was going to steal her?

Choopa, too tired to pull much longer, could just see the two white foals out of the corner of his eye. They were standing, watching.

Strawberry took a step closer.

It was time for the white foals to menace the old stallion. Choopa gave one last tug to the filly's mane, then letting go his hold on her mane, called to the white foals and then called to Dandaloo and Son of Storm. Their answering calls rang out. The white foals sprang towards Strawberry.

Soon Choopa could hear Dandaloo and Son of Storm, their hooves rolling stones as they came down toward the lake. He called again to tell them where he was, then another call to hype up the white foals in their March-fly attack on Strawberry.

In a moment or so Dandaloo and Son of Storm were beside Choopa and the filly, who really looked as though dead.

Choopa's legs gave way beneath him and he lay down.

Dandaloo took one bitterly cold ear of Choopa's into her mouth. Then she lay down beside him, lying close to warm him. She was anxious about the depth and strength of his awful shivering. Once before, he had been warmed by wombats, when snow fell thick and fast and freezing upon him, way away to the south. There was not one wombat to be seen. As she looked around she saw Old Strawberry getting closer to her huddled, frozen group at the edge of the lake.

Son of Storm blew a snorting message at her nose, as good as saying not to worry. She waited till Old Strawberry got a few steps closer, then she sprang up with a furious scream.

Son of Storm sprang, too, from right beside her. Strawberry would not come one step closer to Choopa — and he didn't. He turned and galloped down the banks of the little stream that flowed out of Club Lake.

Son of Storm and Dandaloo were both surprised and puzzled that Strawberry did not try to get straight back on the Divide, however steep the climb would be.

Then those two March-fly white foals began to chase him straight down the creek, snapping at him.

It was time, Dandaloo knew, for her to gallop after him, screaming her terrifying screams. Son of Storm knew that it was time for him to join in the chase, too — it was time to get rid of Old Strawberry forever. But Dandaloo knew she needed to stay with her little blue roan dwarf, so frozen, and the filly



too. She lay down beside them.

Son of Storm went, down the banks of the little stream, after Old Strawberry himself.

Choopa never stirred, nor did the filly, more beautiful than a flake of snow. Indeed, she was so cold and so full of ice-cold water, that she was near to death.

Dandaloo raised her head up and touched the filly's nose with hers, wondering if she were truly alive.

The filly seemed to draw in a big breath. Dandaloo blew warm air into the faintly breathing nostrils, leaning across Choopa to do it. Then she heard the galloping hooves and Son of Storm's roar.

Strawberry must have doubled back.

Dandaloo felt Choopa moving beneath her, and she blew desperately into his nostrils too, rubbed her head along his.

The two young ones must not die of cold. When Son of Storm got back he could help her warm them.

Light was creeping over the sky above Carruther's Peak. Day was coming. Just then she saw the great blundering form of Old Strawberry coming straight for them. She sprang up, screaming at him, and made the huge horse turn uphill.

In no time at all the March-fly foals had caught up with her and were driving him up the steep slope to one side of Club Lake — precipitous snowgrass slopes with an occasional outcrop of rocks. Old Strawberry would be pushing himself to get up there quickly — and Son of Storm intended to force him to climb for his life.

Thinking of life and death, Strawberry had seen Choopa pull the beautiful filly out of the lake, saw her lying there as though drowned beside Choopa, and was determined to kill Choopa if he could. Dandaloo was right — the big strawberry roan was set on destroying her blue roan dwarf.

## Nine

Choopa began to wake, while Son of Storm and the March-fly foals continued to chase Old Strawberry up the snowgrass slopes. Dandaloo was worried and gave Choopa a gentle nip on one ear. His legs began to ache as the blood started to warm up — ache and tingle. Life was taking over. Choopa stretched those aching legs, stretched his back and his neck.

He knew the filly had not drowned, but he had not pulled her out of the lake for her to die on the bank. He took a mouthful of her neck and wither and bit hard enough to startle her — as though to say, ‘Come on. Time to get moving.’

Dandaloo blew one more lungful of warm air into the snowflake’s nostrils and rubbed her head along her neck. Jounama had not had warm air blown into her, nor a warm rub on her head and neck, for a long time. Life began to beat through her freezing body.

Choopa saw her pink-tinged ears begin to twitch, and a trembling of her nostrils. His struggle to pull her out of that icy water was going to be worth it. She was alive. She easily could have been dead and at the bottom of Club Lake.

The filly raised her head. She was certainly alive. Choopa started to rear and dance. He wondered if she would be able to get up and dance and play with him. He had waited to play for so long.

Dandaloo was determined that Strawberry shouldn’t harm Choopa. She joined in the chase, still screaming.

Just then the two white foals came cantering down the hill, having become bored with chasing Old Strawberry, and they started to buck and rear around Choopa.

Dandaloo looked down from the steep hillside and she saw the filly heaving herself up onto her feet, shaking ice water off her coat.

Then Dandaloo saw her do a stiff totter backwards, as though she were still frozen from the ice-cold lake water.

So Dandaloo saw Choopa in a levade, the two white foals galloping round him, and the snowflake filly rearing up and trying to dance beside Choopa. The old mare whinnied with delight.

Visions for an old mare to hold in memory: Choopa encircled by a mist-bow above the Snowy River, and now playing with three young foals — white, like ghosts — on the banks of Club Lake, out of which he had pulled the snowflake

filly.

Surely he would be playing here forever, held in the intensity of that moment, in and out of time, framed by the half-circle of cliffs and crags, and the summit of Carruther's Peak, above.

There was this vision in the old mare's mind, and perhaps permanently imprinted on this place — blue roan dwarf doing his airs-above-the-ground and, in his mind, music playing as perhaps it really was playing over Charlotte Pass on the other side of the Snowy River. Music and dance near the Snowy River; all the tales and legends weaving into the flow of the snowmelt stream.

Dandaloo turned to follow Son of Storm, who was chasing Old Strawberry. It was a long steep climb, up onto the ridge of Carruther's. At last Dandaloo and Son of Storm forced Old Strawberry far, far up the ridge and scrambled up, themselves, after him.

There, high above Club Lake, and in the warm early rays of sunlight, Dandaloo stood and looked back down again.

There was the lake, just catching a first sunbeam, and beside it the young horses dancing — the two white foals, and the miniature filly whom Choopa had pulled out of the ice-bound lake.

Son of Storm watched, too, till stronger sunlight slid down onto the lake — sunlight that would warm the two who had been so long in the water — then he nudged Dandaloo to come with him and keep driving Strawberry back where he came from.

So Dandaloo went on side by side with Son of Storm. In her mind she saw the two pictures of her dancing dwarf — encased in a mist-bow on a rock in the Snowy River, and dancing with the ghostly young colts and the filly who was perhaps a dwarf, on the edge of Club Lake — fixed in place and time.

## Ten

Old Strawberry stumbled, slipped and rolled down the steep Sentinel gully and, of course, Jounama was not there, this time, to see his descent.

Dandaloo and Son of Storm watched his highly undignified return to his herd, and then they went back to join Choopa at the lake, hoping to persuade him to return to Quambat Flat. They took great care on the steep slopes.

Dandaloo was sure that Choopa was seeking for something that was still unfound. In fact, she wondered if he really knew for what he was searching. He did know that he was really seeking *something*, really *seeking*. In her mind kept floating the two visions — Choopa dancing within a glowing mist-bow on the rocks in the Snowy River, and Choopa playing with the three young ones.

Choopa was alone beside Club Lake — the two foals and the filly were no longer there.

Dandaloo called and he answered. Son of Storm called too. From where they stood, high on Carruther's ridge, they saw a gliding flicker of movement down the banks of the creek. The young ones had left Choopa on his own, even his beautiful and exciting dancing had not held them, and the surrounding of Club Lake was empty of all but the blue roan dwarf who had danced for a while and then lay down with tears in his eyes.

At last Choopa began climbing up above the lake to meet his mother and Son of Storm. The brown hawks, far above the ridge, flew down towards him and they were calling, telling him that Old Strawberry had finally fallen to the foot of Sentinel gully, so Choopa knew that the big bully stallion had been chased to his home. His chance to revenge himself for that stunning blow on the side of his head was gone for a while.

Choopa climbed more slowly, occasionally looking down into the lake in case that filly was still sinking and bobbing up, sinking and bobbing up.

Dandaloo, still placing her feet with great care, moved a little faster. She had no wish to hurtle down into the water. Old Strawberry might be careless on steep slopes, but she was not. It became more and more urgent to touch Choopa.

Her hooves brushed through a mat of golden stars, and the strong scent rose around her. Just then Choopa climbed up beside her, and she gave a soft, nickering whinny.

The rivulets of tears had dried as they ran down his dear roan nose. Dandaloo

rubbed against them.

Choopa was so glad to have her with him again, and not to be alone, that he suddenly reared in a courbette, then offered all his perfectly executed airs-above-the-ground to his old roan mother.

There was the sound of hooves approaching on shale and bare earth.

The snowflake filly had come back.

Choopa saw her and danced even more perfectly. When he finally lay down, there were Dandaloo and Son of Storm whinnying to Jounama to follow them home. Better to get into lower country before the coming night's frost came settling down, coating the animals in a film of ice.

A wombat came bundling down the last slope of Mount Lee.

There they all were, in that ancient glacial cirque, bound together by the perfection of the little dwarf dancing: the old mother; the gentle stallion, inheritor of a hundred legends; and the wombat, inheritor of the ancient land; the dwarf snowflake filly, her ears touched with the pink spring dust, saved from Club Lake for an unknown future.

There they all were, a perfect mix to dance on into the future, a perfect mix for the matrix of dreams.

Choopa would never grow into a big handsome stallion, fast as the wind; Dandaloo knew that. But somehow, somehow his dreams *would* come true. They should get home before frost closed in and before the heavy snows came. Yet Dandaloo also knew that as soon as they were in the sheltering bush around Quambat Flat, they would all want to reach the high double lake again — not this deep, deep freezing Club Lake.

Perhaps Club Lake in its enclosed glacial cirque had given all the secrets it could, all the fears, all the joys.

Dandaloo stretched and began to head off up the gentle slope, up over onto the Divide. Mount Northcote was close above that double lake. They must go.

And they went.

## Eleven

Frost was already closing in when they cantered down the snowgrass slopes in that gully that led to Little Austria.

Choopa had caught a glimpse of his beloved lake from the top of Mount Northcote, and was eager to get there. Dandaloo and Son of Storm followed behind him. Suddenly they were all feeling happy.

Choopa was quite deeply expecting to find the two white foals and the snowflake filly there on the edge of the lake.

They were, of course, far back on the banks of the Snowy, where the Club Lake stream flowed into the river. In fact the filly had followed along quietly, climbing Northcote and cantering down the other side, when she saw Choopa sit down in the little gully that was filled with white purslane.

Tears were beginning to form around the corners of his eyes. His head drooped down among the white flowers. There had been a wonderful moment of music and dance with the three young ones; a secret unfolding by that other cold lake below Carruther's Peak. He shut his eyes.

Dandaloo crept up beside him and lay down. She saw the lovely filly come drifting down the snowgrass slopes, and Dandaloo called in welcome. Then that gentle Son of Storm came and stood beside the two blue roans.

The filly stood still for a moment, one forefoot raised.

Dandaloo called again, and Son of Storm looked up at the tiny filly and he called her softly, too, while she put her foot down, and one foot after the other kept descending towards the group, in the centre of which Choopa lay sleeping, tears squeezing beneath his eyelids.

The filly reached the group, and rubbed against Dandaloo. Dandaloo gave a soft whickering sound of welcome. Choopa stirred and finally lifted his head. He looked, almost with disbelief, at the filly whose nose was drooping down towards him.

It was Dandaloo who urged him up on to his feet. In a moment those hooves were dancing on the snowgrass, and the little filly was stepping out a pattern beside him — the pair of tiny horses danced beside the magic double lake.

When Choopa rose in a courbette, she tried to copy him. He was delighted, then leapt through the air in a levade, feeling, suddenly, that he was possessed by beauty and perfection, then he was standing beside her, urging her to try to

waltz.

Choopa bowed deeply to her and wished that Franz could have fastened spangles on his forefeet, he so deeply wanted to be beautiful.

There they were, dancing, when the moon rose above Mount Lee and Carruther's Peak.

Soon after moonrise, it was time to start for Quambat Flat. Dandaloo and Son of Storm began to head south.

Choopa was undecided. He followed them after one long, lingering look at his magic lake. Then he gave the little filly a nip and tugged her by the mane to follow, then danced ahead of her. He made the dance as irresistible as he could.

She followed.

They climbed out of the Canyon onto the stony cattle road that went below a shaly bluff, then along the Divide on the Northcote Pass and below Mueller's Peak before it went up onto the highest mountain where the remains of last winter's snow hung above Lake Cootapatamba.

Dandaloo, with her fine feeling for direction and distance, followed the cattle road, and they all jogged along after her. Son of Storm, bringing up the rear, was elated that they were at last safely heading for home. He kept a friendly eye on Jounama, too. It would be stupid to split their party now.

Choopa did not really want to leave the high country and its lakes. There'd be another trip to climb up again but, for now, what fun to have Jounama coming too! If only the twin white foals had come also — they would have great games.

So the four went on towards the Ramshead, dropping over near the head of Leatherbarrel Creek.

Choopa watched Jounama to see if she seemed affected by her feeling of being thrust out into space. Of flying through the air into the freezing water of Club Lake.

Jounama was tired. The freezing waters of Club Lake had taken most of the energy out of her. She just followed. As the descent down the slopes of the Ramshead Range steepened, she placed her feet as carefully as she saw Choopa placing his.

When they reached the treeline and were in amongst snow gums, there was the welcoming sound of the pardalote which had lived there for years. Dandaloo picked an unerring way through the snow gums, till they reached a flat place and were on a little path that leads down to Dead Horse Gap.

Choopa danced along jauntily, occasionally rubbing against a tree trunk or branch. There were steeper slopes ahead and then the Gap itself, then a climb. He knew Jounama was tired and cold, but the further they went into forests, the warmer they would get.

When at last Dandaloo stopped to rest and they all dropped down onto the snowgrass and stretched out wearily, Choopa went to sleep but found himself dreaming that he was still struggling to pull Jounama out of Club Lake with huge effort — lung-bursting effort. The dreams kept changing. Sometimes he was dancing with Jounama and the strange-eyed, white foals *on* the surface of Lake Albina, weaving through shadows of bright coloured mist, till the bright colours were in Jounama's ears. Finally, he slept peacefully, but the tears still squeezed out below his eyelids.

Dandaloo, when it was time to go on, got up to waken him with love overflowing, saw the welling teardrops, and rubbed her face against them.

Choopa raised his head to hers. He realised whatever was the promise, the secret, the dream, would elude him no longer. Then he turned to stir Jounama but she was not there. The space between her and Son of Storm was empty — just the grass pressed down with the shape of her.

Choopa started up with a desperate neigh. For a moment it seemed that an answer sounded a long way away — an answer that seemed to come from under water, deeply below water ...

It was not true — Choopa could see that neither Dandaloo nor Son of Storm heard it. He put his head down onto the snowgrass between his front legs, and called and called.

The only neigh that answered came from one of the white foals — a young colt's neigh, uncertain and sad.

Rain started in a misty drizzle. Choopa was already so cold that he could not get much more miserable. He forced himself to open his eyes; the rain blended with his tears but he saw a faint rainbow through the rain. Dandaloo and Son of Storm lay down on either side of him with their comforting warmth. Choopa rubbed his face with one foreleg and with the sound of the rain, the dream of dancing on the lake returned, as though all the young horses were dancing in front of a rainbow coloured mist, and as though snow dust or spray of cold, cold water was touched with colour too. He called Jounama once more and then slept away his dreams.

Dandaloo's nose sniffed the scent of tears on his dear face. Then when he was deeply asleep, she and Son of Storm went seeking Jounama.

They were troubled. Somehow it had seemed that Jounama would not be very capable of looking after herself. Also, Old Strawberry might come looking for her and would be a danger to Choopa.

They searched for her tracks and scent and went off quietly.

Choopa woke after a while. His world was empty and he was utterly alone.

He got up and started to follow.



## Twelve

The western face of the mountains was darkly lit with sunset, and all the striations of rocks down off Carruther's Peak, all the steep gullies and crags, were suffused with sunset's glow when Choopa peered over the brink of The Sentinel gully.

A hoof print of Jounama's was there for him to see, as she had stepped over the edge onto a faint wombat's track.

He looked further. Undoubtedly she was following that wombat's path. Choopa stepped down on to it himself, and just then he saw the wombat on ahead, bumbling along without paying any attention to young horses that might pass him.

Choopa recognised the wombat as a friend of his. Jounama had already passed the wombat some time ago, leaving Choopa as the only one following. Choopa quickened his pace and blew greetings softly to the round, furry animal. The wombat glanced around and gave Choopa a very encouraging look.

Jounama was already at the steep slopes of The Sentinel, and turning back to follow the zigzagging path as it slowly lost height down the gully.

Choopa followed the wombat.

The wombat stopped at a hole beside the track, then suddenly went down the hole and was gone. He left Choopa standing on a little shelf in a last ray of sunlight. He waited for something to happen. The wombat surely must return. Choopa waited a little longer, then feeling sleepy in the sunshine he lay down on the little shelf and, in spite of being anxious for Jounama, he quite soon went to sleep.

The last of the light was now glowing through the Sentinel Gully, and the strong scent of the mountain ash leaves were rising upward when Choopa woke.

There, against the dusty light of the sunset, were the three young horses: the twin foals and the tiny yearling with the faint look of sunset in her forelock and mane — the jewel of Old Strawberry's herd.

Choopa nearly sprang up to greet her, but he lay still as she walked slowly over the little platform. He lay quite still as she got closer and closer — as she extended her trembling nose to his ears. But when her nose touched one of his blue ears, that ear twitched slightly, and Jounama leapt away.

She sprang off the small platform, and was gone over the creek and beyond

the little waterfall, half-hidden by spray. To Choopa, she could have been ribboned in rainbow. He wondered where the two white foals were — they had been there when he woke up — but he did not stop to think for long, as he leapt after Jounama. His swinging legs seemed to tie themselves in knots, and he fell, he somersaulted, he sprang up and burst through the edge of the little pool below the waterfall.

Jounama was gone.

He looked all around, and saw Dandaloo standing far above, looking down the steep gully. Suddenly he called her, and she answered and then started down the steep gully. Just beside her was Son of Storm. They must have hurried after him.

Jounama appeared on the slopes of The Sentinel, and then vanished.

Choopa went to the crop of rocks on The Sentinel where she had been standing, but there was no sign of her, no hoof marks. Then he went upwards on the zigzagging wombat track to join Dandaloo and Son of Storm. Behind him, darkness began slowly to creep up the gully.

He heard a soft call that somehow he knew was Jounama's, and he wondered if she were following those ghostly twins. He had already realised that the twins saw very well in the dark. He thought of them, all three dancing around Lake Albina, their legs spangled with the splashed-up water of the magic lake.

He looked back and the oblique light of sunset nearly blinded him. For a moment he thought he heard Franz's music, but then he realised he was a long way from the Snowy River and Charlotte Pass. If he got up onto the main Divide, he might see where those wildly beautiful young horses went, although the fact that the foals could see in the dark did not mean that they showed up in the night.

Choopa kept plodding up the zigzagging wombat path, and Dandaloo and Son of Storm waited for him. He did not know that, from where his mother stood, she saw him haloed by the western light, and that she felt over and over again that some promise must come true.

He hurried.

The light went off the western face last of all. The eastern side — the Snowy River and Club Lake — would be pewter-cold.

Son of Storm knew that darkness would claim that eastern face and he knew he should hurry if he wanted to see what was happening over there.

He turned back, and started to climb the steep gully again. It was all as he had known it would be when he reached the Divide — the Snowy, visible down below as a pewter and blue and rose ribbon, and Club Lake reflecting the last light in the sky.

What he had not expected was that Old Strawberry would be balanced on the edge of the Divide, looking this way and that, as if wondering where the young ones had gone.

Son of Storm looked towards The Sentinel. He knew that Jounama and the white twins were somewhere there, but already shadows were falling on the slopes. Suddenly, in one shadowed gully, he saw a ghostly wisp of white ... and knew by the stiffening of Old Strawberry that he had seen the two white ghosts.

Then Son of Storm saw the third — Jounama — and wondered what Old Strawberry would do next. He did not have to wait and wonder ... Old Strawberry headed towards The Sentinel ridge.

Son of Storm thought there must be a track there *somewhere*. He watched Old Strawberry closely, and it was as though he did not pick his way carefully at all. It looked, to Son of Storm, as if he *must* fall and hurtle down the steep slopes.

Then Old Strawberry stumbled and fell, but did not slide. He picked himself up and went on more carefully down the knife-edge ridge and precipitous slopes of The Sentinel and, opposite, were the cliffs and rocks of Watson's Crag.

He stopped once, and seemed to look down and see the little ghosts. Then he leapt forward urgently again — carelessly, Son of Storm thought — and Son of Storm went more carefully himself, so that he could watch Old Strawberry and eventually see the whole scene that was unfolding on the slopes of The Sentinel and in the gully.

Presently, he was bothered to see Dandaloo and Choopa starting to climb upwards towards the slope of The Sentinel.

Somehow they must have known there was a path.

Son of Storm hurried and got more and more anxious about the meeting that must occur on the steep slopes. Both Choopa and Dandaloo faded into the night. He strained his eyes to see them.

Suddenly he saw the strange, bundle-shaped figure of a wombat cutting across the gully, and then Choopa following it.

Son of Storm almost stopped to watch.

Then Old Strawberry lost a foothold and began to hurtle down the side of The Sentinel, directly above the three ghosts.

Son of Storm knew in every bone and vein that he had to save Old Strawberry from sweeping them all away. Choopa, below, knew he must hurry to save the situation. All he could think of was his struggle to pull Jounama out of that freezing, deep, Club Lake. Now his lungs were bursting in his chest again as he forced his short legs up the steep slopes of The Sentinel.

In a blur, he saw Dandaloo above him, and another blur that he saw, with a

sigh of relief, was the shape of the wombat. Surely the wombat would know of a climbable track.

Choopa called, but the sound was only a whisper, almost a sob. He stopped and tried again. This time the wombat heard and turned around, then came back a short distance as though encouraging him to follow. Choopa determined to hurry even more, if that was possible. He heard his own breath rasping somewhere inside his blue roan chest.

It was a strange scene. He could see Son of Storm far above — a dark horse only just visible in the darkness; his mother, lighter coloured; then the three ghosts, and, finally, Old Strawberry also more visible than Son of Storm. Old Strawberry was hurrying at a wild speed down The Sentinel ridge, a wild and dangerous speed. Night was closing in, darkening the scene, but Choopa carried it all in his mind's eye — the whole thing enclosed in the sides of Sentinel's peak and the curved gully, except that Old Strawberry was on the top of the ridge, silhouetted against the faintly-lit night sky.

A shiver had gone right down Choopa's backbone as he recognised Old Strawberry. Even as he strained to climb up, his short blue hind legs pushing, he knew that the pale roan horse would try to kill him if Choopa caught up with Jounama and the two white ghosts, knew that it was really Jounama of whom the old stallion was deeply protective.

But *who* was it who had pulled Jounama out of Club Lake's freezing waters? Choopa's future was tied up with his past — his enormous effort to save Jounama.

Then it happened. That big roan stallion lost his footing, flew through the air, and came down on the steep slope of The Sentinel, starting immediately to slide down what was the small funnel gouged out by a spring avalanche of snow and rock. Choopa, trying to keep climbing and watch at the same time, realised that the small funnel was directly above the two white ghosts, *and* above Jounama.

Old Strawberry might keep on sliding, and sweep the three young ones down ahead of him.

The darkness in that small avalanche gully would be intense.

Choopa could just see the wombat veer to one side, as though to make sure he could not be collected by the sliding, struggling horse. He saw the slowly sliding stallion gather enough speed to sweep Jounama off her feet, so that she was sliding, too; the two little ghosts — able to see in the dark — seemed to spring to one side and save themselves.

Gasping for breath, Choopa struggled on. Suddenly he knew that, by some wonderful effort, Dandaloo had appeared close by. He could hear Son of Storm hurrying across the slope, far up the gully, but mainly Choopa's attention was on

Jounama and the big stallion.

The collision with Jounama had slowed down the slide of Old Strawberry, and below them was a rock-filled hollow.

Dandaloo might get there first. Choopa pushed himself up even faster, haunches aching. He was hoping that hollow would stop their slide — if it were curved enough. Then he saw them gather speed on some snowgrass. Jounama was trying to dig in her hooves and get herself away from Old Strawberry.

Choopa wondered what he would do. He could only imagine himself grabbing Jounama by the mane and holding on fast. He did not wonder what would happen if the two of them were stopped by the rocks in the hollow.

He reached the hollow fast, and stepped in amongst the rocks very carefully — Jounama's battle to dig in her hooves had had the effect of slowing her, so that Old Strawberry had slipped past her and into that small basin where, in fact, the rocks held up his slide, even, perhaps, broke some of his bones. For a short moment, Choopa wondered what Old Strawberry might try to do if, indeed, he were unhurt and could get up on to his feet, among those rocks?

But Choopa's whole self was taken up with his enormous effort to reach Jounama, where she was still sliding down in the almost-dark above him. Somehow he knew that if he waited for her to slide down towards him, her pace would only get faster — possibly carry him with her down the steep slope.

So he kept straining upwards and Jounama, her slide indeed getting faster and faster, kept coming towards him.

She hit a bump in the snowgrass that tossed her up and half around. Choopa saw her mane fly up in the air — or did he dream it? Dreaming so much of how he would pull her by her mane, with its strawberry strands, pull her and hold her with all his strength, digging in his hooves. After all, he had pulled her out of Club Lake. Now, surely, she would not be too heavy to hold — he would have to grab quite a large mouthful. He could dream of that beautiful, faintly-coloured mane flowing over his face.

Then he was there, just close to her, watching her struggle to get her legs and hooves underneath her, while he tried to work out how to grab her.

Son of Storm knew he was too far up the gully to help. Dandaloo was closer.

Choopa called, aloud.

Then, strangely, they all heard a man's voice. Choopa's heart seemed to leap with joy.

'I'm coming, Pferdl, I'm coming,' and then, leaping down from rock to rock, sliding on the snowgrass, came Franz.

Just then Jounama made a prodigious effort to dig in her hooves and slid a little closer to Choopa. Now was the time to grab her mane.

Choopa grabbed, and Franz called out, 'Fest halten, Pferd!'.

Choopa held on tight, thinking of how he held her from drowning in that freezing Club Lake, and then pulled her right up onto the bank.

But now, there was Old Strawberry coming angrily over from the rocky basin, the wish to destroy Choopa written all over him. Choopa stood there, still holding a mouthful of Jounama's mane. Suddenly he let go and succeeded in doing a courbette to greet Franz, who was there now to help, with a coiled rope in his hand. There, sitting, watching, was the wombat, and close by stood Dandaloo.

Then Choopa, with one eye on Old Strawberry, watched Franz put the rope round Jounama's neck and then run his gentle hands over her ears and head till he had quietened her.

It was then that the big stallion came for Choopa.

Franz was expecting him, and he threw a stone to land clattering on a rock to deflect the mad charge; the noise also got Old Strawberry off-balance, which gave Choopa the chance to rush at him so that he fell.

Dandaloo, knowing that her furious screams horrified Old Strawberry, came hurrying over. Then screaming, and as he struggled to his feet, chasing Old Strawberry, galloping, stumbling, falling, down off the slopes of The Sentinel, to the flatter floor of the gully.

Franz was patting Jounama with his gentle, magic touch, persuading her to be led towards the gully's floor.

The night seemed to have got even darker, but Choopa realised that the two white foals were following unerringly. There, on the flatter floor of the gully, Choopa did a levade for Franz, and then stood while his own ears were rubbed. He found, then, that Franz was still holding Jounama, shadowy in the dark night, holding her and bringing her up close to him, so that he could touch her nose with his.

Jounama pulled back at first, until Franz gently edged her closer to Choopa, just her shadow in the night, but Choopa could see her as though in starlit memory, the lovely conformation of her. Her mane and forelock were tinged with sunset-coloured roan threads as she came closer, gently walking beside Franz. It was as though Franz was handing Choopa a gift, but Choopa had already accepted a gift from Club Lake and again from The Sentinel's steep slopes.

Son of Storm was carefully picking his way down and Dandaloo was still facing Old Strawberry with tremendous defiance.

The two white foals also danced nimbly down the steep slopes and as they got closer, Choopa noticed their queer eyes, and wished he could see as well in

the night as they obviously could.

Franz let Jounama loose, just when Son of Storm reached the little group, and drew some carrots out of his pocket.

‘I knew you needed me, Pferdl,’ he whispered.

As Choopa munched the pieces of carrot, and giving a final rub at the base of Choopa’s ears, and Jounama’s, Franz, in his sturdy mountain boots, melted off up the gully.

Dandaloo watched him go.

They all heard the mopoke’s soft call from the trees below, coming like a benediction — *mopoke, mopoke, a gift of love* — and Franz vanished into the night.

Though he could no longer see him, Choopa saluted Franz and his gift with a graceful dance and a last loving call, throwing all his heart to the invisible man who was climbing up to his bivouac below a big rock outcrop.

## Thirteen

The winter had come in with rain first and strong winds, then snow and stronger winds, snow falling down at Quambat Flat. The wind was not so fierce, low down, but the horses, seeking shelter, could hear the noise of it down by the streams that feed the great Murray River.

Choopa was restless.

Dandaloo knew that he was wondering about the promise that seemed to have been made, up there, about the gift that Franz seemed to have bestowed, or that seemed to be part of the high country.

Choopa, himself, was dreaming about the wind roaring up the Northcote Canyon and The Sentinel gully, wondering if Old Strawberry had recovered from the beating which Son of Storm had given him or whether Old Strawberry would always want to give a beating in revenge, wondering where the three young horses were wintering? Wondering why they had suddenly vanished away?

One morning he began to plod through the driving snow and the wind that pushed him from behind, snow coating his eyelashes and stinging his eyes. That wind and driving snow seemed to come in all directions, but Choopa kept on going. The same old image that had drawn him to the high lakes, was calling him again — the same voice, the same sound, like the music of water and of wind in the rocks.

He crossed the head of the Ingegoodbe. An unusual shaft of sunlight illuminated one of the snowmelt pools. He went on in the direction of the Cascades, although the snow lay more deeply. The shaft of sunlight had changed his mood and the mood of the day rather, and the little blue roan went dancing up the track. As he went, the snow became deeper and more frozen and crackling.

When he reached the Cascades, the creek was edged with ice, with the water bubbling below it. *Up higher, maybe the lakes and the Snowy River would be frozen.* Choopa did a somersault with joy in the increasing snow, in the frozen pools, in the very fact of being out, doing what he wanted to do, going where he longed to go.

Later, later, he would miss Dandaloo and Son of Storm.



He hurried on up the steep track out of the Cascades, breathless when he reached Bob's Garden, and the snow was even thicker, even more frozen, with a fine covering of falling snow helping to make his hooves grip. Surely snow had not fallen as thick as this so early last winter? How much might there be right up on the tops?

*Where would those three beautiful young horses be wintering? Where would Old Strawberry be?*

Old Strawberry still offered some danger, Choopa knew, and he was not very keen to meet him. The very thought of that big horse made him imagine that he saw him in every looming shape of rock and tree trunk.

A cloud of snow swirled around him as he crossed Dead Horse Gap on to the Ramshead Range. No matter; soon he would be in the shelter of trees, as soon as he crossed the cattle track. He was in trees for quite a long way, then he could hear the pardalote's voice in the last of the snow gums.

Out in that big basin, above the trees, the snow beat relentlessly, but Choopa loved that basin and went dancing out into it, throwing a somersault for sheer joy.

There was not a wombat to be seen, though Choopa knew that several lived around that area. Perhaps they knew the weather was going to get rough and the snow heavier.

Surely there was danger for anyone as small as Choopa.

It seemed to him that he could hear that music as though he were standing on Charlotte Pass above the Snowy River, but the snow was falling faster, now, and the wind blowing it into sheets of rough ice. He went on; the weather was too rough for dancing and there were none of his animal friends about.

One lone currawong flew overhead, among the falling flakes, calling, calling ...

Choopa knew that the cold was getting more and more intense the higher up the mountains he climbed. A swirl of snow cloud cleared, momentarily disclosing the curve of the cornice that every winter hung above the lake.

Choopa knew exactly where the lake was, and he scratched through the snow with one hoof.

There was ice below, as he expected, and the cold wind ruffled the surface as he pawed at it. He looked upwards. The great, high cornice, directly above the lake, looked more menacing under a grey sky. Then the sky was blotted out by the clouds, and by the fading of the day.

Choopa shivered with the intense cold. Never, not even in the heavy winter before last, had he felt such bone-breaking cold, and night was closing in ... This was where Franz had caught him. Franz should be here.

Never mind, he would be a little warmer at Lake Albina, but he did wonder if it, too, would be frozen solid — whether he would be able to dance on it, like the young horses did in his vision of them, clothed in rainbows.

On he went, up on to Rawson's Pass, slower now. Kosciuszko, the highest mountain, was up above that pass, but he intended to cut across, where the summer track went, just below Mueller's Pass and across onto Northcote Pass, from where he could see his beloved double lake. He could remember galloping down there, and plunging into the lake in summertime.

As he thought of it, he thought how Dandaloo and Son of Storm were with him then, and suddenly the cold became more piercing. He knew he wanted to find them there. He had lost the joyous feeling and sense of adventure. To have Dandaloo with him, as always, would be perfect.

Son of Storm was Bri Bri's father. Who was his, Choopa's, father? Somehow it had always seemed as if Dandaloo and Son of Storm belonged to each other, and in fact Choopa's first memory, other than Dandaloo, was Son of Storm's head outlined by moonbeams as the big brown horse looked down at him, lying in the bushes — and first memories have amazing strength.

It was slippery where the summer track cut across onto the Northcote Pass; anything on a traverse was slippery with ice underneath a light coating of snow. Then, all of a sudden, he reached the pass and should have been able to see the lake, like a piece of sky.

Lake Albina, like Lake Cootapatamba, was covered with snow.

Choopa stood for one second, overlooking that lake — or where he knew it to be — and then, though he knew that there was ice under the snow, and slippery underfoot, he sprang into a gallop down towards the flat canyon floor.

Snow spume flew around and behind him from his flying hooves, so that he was like a galloping snowcloud. He had to keep going so that he did not slip or fall, and he got faster and faster, not knowing what might happen at the bottom, but just filled with excitement.

The freezing air bit into him. He was flying and it was entirely wonderful. Then he heard a neigh from somewhere below him, and through the cloud of snow that he made himself, he could see shadowy shapes and was certain that they were dancing on the ice.

Choopa gathered his breath and neighed, too. Ribbons of moonlight and snow spume seemed to encircle those young horses.

Then they heard his call, saw him coming, and they stood at the edge of the lake to greet him — or, perhaps, to slow his headlong gallop.

Choopa was rather puzzled. He suspected that to gallop on to the lake might invite the force of his gallop to break the ice, but he knew that there was a small

bank of flat snowgrass at the edge of the lake, which would give him space to slow his mad gallop and perhaps start to dance. He began to prop to a standstill. It was not the place to somersault — that would surely break the ice! Instead he waltzed and danced on his hind legs.

Jounama moved forward a step and the two white colts stood behind her. Choopa looked around as if expecting Franz, because somehow he heard Franz's waltz playing.

The moonlight was shining on Carruther's Peak.

Then, from across the lake, there came a trumpeting neigh.

Choopa felt a shiver go down his back.

Old Strawberry could not possibly have climbed that steep Sentinel gully with this ice. But how could he have got here? And how would any of them get away without freezing to death?

## Fourteen

Choopa felt the bone-breaking grip of the cold as he stood for a moment, looking at the big stallion's bulky shape on the slope, way above him.

He would dance now, just as he had in that dream ... make the dream come true ... dream and music all interwoven, and then, as the music from below Charlotte Pass seemed to sound in his ears, he danced out onto the lake.

The snow began to fall in a curtain, through which moonbeams fell, reminding him of the lights which Franz played on the spangles around his legs. Snow spume rose around his legs, gleaming and glowing. If only Franz were there; if only, perhaps, Dandaloo would come and see him dancing on the surface of the lake ...

Tears gathered in his eyes as he danced. He knew, so well, how much Dandaloo wanted him to be beautiful. Then he heard her call from the Northcote Pass.

Jounama did not seem to have heard her. The little filly walked over the frozen lake towards him.

This time she would not run away, as she had when he lay in the sun outside the wombat hole.

Then Old Strawberry's neigh sounded, and Choopa realised that she was frightened of the big roan because she jumped a little, touched her nose to his, looked in the direction of her father, and shivered slightly.

Choopa looked at the two foals. They appeared to be a little nervous, too.

As Jounama touched her nose to Choopa's, Old Strawberry gathered himself together and began to hurtle down the slope, slipping and stumbling. The big stallion remembered falling into the lake and knew the lake must be there, and was afraid of going through the ice. Choopa could see the shape of him in moonglow, beginning to go around the edge of the lake.

Strawberry was cunning.

Those two March-fly foals followed Choopa's dancing towards the edge, and rushed at Strawberry. Dandaloo, coming down from the Pass, began a scream of fury. Choopa called her, and encouraged the foals to leap at the big stallion, nipping and kicking. They seemed to be able to see perfectly.

Dandaloo came down more carefully than Choopa had done, and she sent a call to Son of Storm as she descended; his answer caused Strawberry to stop in

full stride. If Jounama was afraid of him, he was afraid of Son of Storm.

It only needed an echoing neigh from Strawberry to bring Son of Storm galloping down from the Pass to join Dandaloo.

Dandaloo felt the intense cold. *She*, very experienced in many winters, knew that they must get far lower down, but there was Choopa dancing on the frozen lake. She called him, and he called Jounama. Strawberry trumpeted his anger. Son of Storm, aware, too, that it was time they all went, took some menacing steps towards the roan. The two foals bit and kicked at him, and the clouds grew lower, the cold more intense.

Dandaloo's call said 'home', but Choopa kept on dancing, closer and closer to where Strawberry stood, and Jounama kept right beside him. All of a sudden Choopa took a great leap towards the heavy horse, striking him on the shoulder and making him slip.

For a moment Jounama was standing in front of her father, unprotected by Choopa. Just as she gathered herself to jump after Choopa, her father, maddened with jealousy, charged at her, trying to swing her round. She fell on the slippery snow-covered ice, and Choopa was there beside her in an instant, and the white March-fly foals, to protect her.

It was time, then, for Son of Storm to step in and drive Strawberry away; to punish him.

Home was, for Son of Storm and Dandaloo, the lower end and bush of Quambat Flat; for Choopa, 'home' was beginning to be the Northcote Canyon and Lake Albina, but he knew, as the snow fell more thickly, and as he felt the aching cold, that it was time to go lower down, among trees.

After helping Dandaloo and Son of Storm to drive Old Strawberry away on the faint track that threaded its way through the huge boulders down the Northcote Canyon, Choopa led Jounama back the way he had come, over the headwaters of the Leatherbarrel Creek and out on to the Ramshead Range and the Basin.

Through the muffling snowfall, he heard the voices of the brown hawks.

The snow fell thickly, plastering the big snow gums below the Basin. Rocks loomed up through the snowflake curtain, and there was the sound of the Bogong Creek.

Sometimes trees separated Jounama and Choopa and he would try to see her through the silver-barked snow gums. Occasionally a splash of red on the bark would look like a roan streak in her mane or tail.

Then she would just be a flitting ghost among the trunks — beautiful, silent-footed — and Choopa would hurry to join her. The slope steepened and the trees were smaller and closer together. They slipped and slid down the last timbered

slopes to Dead Horse Gap, then out onto the wider cattle track and across it under scudding snow clouds, that little wraith of a filly keeping close to Choopa.

The climb up Dead Horse Ridge made them warmer. Then, at last, they were going along the top of the ridge, dropping down into Bob's Garden, heading towards the Cascades.

Choopa knew every tree, every little tea-tree-filled creek, but it was a long way through strange country for Jounama.

Choopa watched her trotting along through the trees and the falling snow. She was a lissom shadow between the silver trunks. As they travelled further and further from the high mountains, she came after and ran beside him, flank to flank. In fact, she clung more closely beside him when a few other brumbies appeared, just above the Cascades. There was one young stallion whom Choopa knew and did not really like, but who admired Choopa's tricks. He noticed that young one trying to cut Jounama off from him and from Son of Storm and Dandaloo. So, without seeming to hurry, he edged over himself and pushed the young colt away.

Jounama was *his*, won by rescuing her from Club Lake, won on the steep slopes of The Sentinel, given to him, he was sure, by Franz. Choopa did a dance of joy, finishing by somersaulting towards that acquisitive colt.

The colt was frightened by the rolling ball that was Choopa, and backed off as that rolling ball almost reached his legs. That colt had seen Choopa doing all his fascinating tricks before, but never *towards* him.

And when Choopa sprang up and chased him away, it was too much altogether. The young colt gave up any idea of stealing the beautiful filly for himself, and went off through the trees with Choopa chasing him, but then returning to Jounama in case that colt doubled back.

From then on, Jounama trotted flank to flank with him, offering a quick nip to any other horse who came near her.

They trotted on, like shadows through the snow gums, till Dandaloo thought it time to gather her little herd together — under the black sallee where the robin sang — and let them all rest.

They lay down, close together. They had all travelled a long way, to the high lakes and back. They had all suffered extreme cold.

It was Franz who had said, 'You can't teach an old donkey how to dance on ice', and looked at Choopa with pride as he said it, but Franz had not seen his beloved dwarf dancing on Lake Albina when it was frozen — an even more perfect dance than he had ever done in the circus ring — and with the beautiful filly following him through the falling snow and the pale moonbeams.

Dandaloo's eyes closed in sleep, but the faithful Son of Storm stayed awake

and on guard, until Choopa's little bush animal friends gathered around them and formed a circle. Later Choopa woke and, seeing the circle of bright eyes around him, he got up and danced.

Jounama opened her eyes and saw the circle of wombats, echidnas, and wallabies, and Choopa dancing in the centre.

Then he danced towards her, claiming her, and led her into the centre of the ring. The animals began to walk, shuffle, and hop around them. courbettes, levades, a dance in a light veil of falling snow, half-lit by the light of the sinking moon.

This time Choopa would not let Jounama vanish in the night.

This time Jounama would not obey Old Strawberry's call.

## *Fifteen*

Autumn was not a great time for a foal to be born, because there was not much fresh grass, but there were, however, lots of seed pods on the shrubs for a mare to eat to help make the good milk that even a dwarf foal requires.

Choopa's and Jounama's foal was indeed tiny, but perfectly formed. She was as white as her mother, small as a snowflake, and beautiful. Dandaloo thought she had never seen anything so small; even Choopa had not been as small. And this one had tips to her perfect ears, as her mother had, with a faint dusting of pink, like the snow gets in spring, and some pink hairs in her mane and tail.

The two parents wanted to take their tiny foal up to Lake Albina where they had danced on the ice, but they knew that, with her short legs, it would take her time to get there. Choopa was wishing, too, that he might find Franz there, in the lovely autumn weather. Just to hear his gentle voice saying 'Pferdl' and to show him the tiny foal.

Franz, of course, would have worked it out that an autumn foal would be born to Choopa and Jounama, if any foal were born at all to two dwarfs.

Dandaloo had watched over Jounama anxiously, seen her milk beginning to come, seen signs of the foal's kicking when Jounama drank the very cold water at the Cascade Creek. She had been close by, like an elephant 'nurse' when the tiny creature was born.

Choopa seemed to have grown bigger and more handsome when she looked at him. It was as though the baptism in the high lakes had cast a spell over him, and which was working now that his daughter was born — but she worried about the journey to Lake Albina. Son of Storm was quite unworried. He had given Old Strawberry such a fright that he thought the aggressive old horse would never try to take his daughter again.

Anyway, as they got higher into the mountains, there was the kestrel, telling a tale about Old Strawberry having moved his herd to the Munyang River. That was good news, and there was the silver breast of the bird hovering over the lake as a good omen for the travellers.

The small party of five horses grazed and rolled by the lake which now seemed to Choopa to be his possession.

To the man walking down to the lake from Mueller's Peak, the tiny foal looked like a puppy or a toy horse. His heart quickened with joy. His present for



Choopa ...

Then the group of horses all turned and stared up towards the Divide. Some sound had disturbed them all, and there, silhouetted against the sky, was Old Strawberry's bulk, flanked on either side by two young colts, sons of his. Suddenly, as if they had just seen the five horses below, the stallion and the colts began to gallop down the steep slope in a thunderous wave towards the group of five.

The man gave a choking cry of 'Pferdl', and began to run. Son of Storm and Dandaloo both moved up the slope at a gallop too — blue roan mare and the strong brown stallion — galloping to meet Old Strawberry and his sons, the old mare screaming with rage.

The shock of the screaming and the galloping to meet them might stop the downward rush.

Son of Storm, although a gentle horse, was an experienced fighter and understood the value of shock tactics.

He was not wrong in his strategy. Old Strawberry and his sons stopped in their tracks when they heard Dandaloo and saw her and Son of Storm coming, but they only stopped for a second.

Old Strawberry, in that second, drew breath and sent an imperious call to Jounama.

In the moment when Jounama looked up the hill at the great, bulky stallion, the tiny foal darted away from beside her — toy horse filled with curiosity trying to join the predatory brothers and the old father.

Jounama sprang after her and one of Strawberry's colts put on a tremendous turn of speed and encircled both Jounama and the foal. Jounama evaded him. Then Old Strawberry himself had managed to cut off the foal from Jounama.

The fastest of the stallions was now after the foal, cutting her off from joining her mother, and Jounama was now screaming with fear.

Dandaloo heard the scream and changed her direction to race at the young stallion who was chasing Choopa's foal. Everything looked maddened to the man. There was the blue roan mare and the big brown stallion. There was the blue roan dwarf and the white dwarf filly and the big strawberry roan, all of them galloping and cutting each other out, all after the tiny toy foal who ran out of the melee, to be followed by her mother.

The tiny foal was terrified now, and there were such big horses chasing her. By then there was the man on foot, running, too; she had never seen a man before. She saw a clump of rocks which offered shelter. There was a hollow beneath one of the rocks — big enough and small enough to hide a toy foal. She crawled into it and the big horses went thundering past. Her heart stopped

thumping as she got her breath, then her mother appeared between the rocks and the man was standing there, too, stroking Jounama's ears, which she accepted as if she had never forgotten.

Presently that toy filly crept out to get a drink, and she stayed there while Franz petted her mother.

Naturally the thundering big horses came back, looking for her and her mother.

Old Strawberry tracked her down by scent. The foal heard his hooves on rock and cringed away, back into her shelter. Her heart started thumping again with terror.

Then the two colts forced her out of her shelter, but her terrified screams brought Son of Storm and Choopa, both of them racing to protect the two dwarf fillies. But the little foal fled, and twisted and turned and dodged and ran round and under the colts, mouth open, screaming whenever she could get breath.

Jounama was beside herself with fear for her foal. If only the foal would stay still, they could protect her. Son of Storm would chase Old Strawberry away.

At last the foal collapsed, sobbing for breath, and Jounama and Choopa stood over her. It was then that Son of Storm mustered up Old Strawberry and the two young stallions and drove them away from Lake Albina. By this time Franz had climbed up the slope and was swinging a rope around in a punishing sort of way.

When they were right away, Jounama stirred the foal and took her to the hole beneath the rocks again, and the little one slept there, got up to drink, and slept again, and forgot her fears with the warm comfort of her mother.

When dawn came and, with it, the warmth of the sun, its rays coming over the shoulder of Carruther's Peak, Franz was still there, whispering to Choopa, stroking him and Jounama with his magic fingers, gently touching the toy foal so like her mother and father. She would never forget Franz — the giver of strength and love.

Choopa stood out in the sunshine, looking at his beloved lake. A faint radiation mist rose over the water and, as the sun's rays strengthened, he saw a rainbow over the water where they had danced on the ice.

He went down to the lake, then, and stood there in the water.

Franz came down the slope with the foal in his arms, and stood looking at Choopa with his rainbow halo.

### Author's Note

The mist-bow, or rainbow halo, that envelopes Choopa as he stands above the Snowy River and Lake Albina, is called a Brocken bow, or Brocken spectre. A set of rings of coloured lights is visible around the shadow of an object or person as the *shadow* is cast upon a nearby low-lying cloud.

It is named for Mt Brocken, the highest peak in the Harz mountains of Germany, where the phenomenon is often quite spectacular.

## **The Thousandth Brumby**

## **Dedication**

*For John, who took me to Beloka*

## One

Always a loner, from the time he was born. 'Birds of a feather stick together', but there were no birds of his feather, until that bronze cuckoo called up the dog that was sitting on the ground by the dead stockman.

The brumbies that were watching saw the dog cock his ears up at the bronze cuckoo's whistle.

They saw the dog join that loner brumby, saw them both melt into thick bush; the black brumby with four white legs and the black and blue dog with the white paws.

The black brumby with the four white legs saw the dog following and felt glad of its company, thinking that dog might be a good friend.

Something told him that there was going to be a fierce storm, and there would be room for a dog, too, under the overhanging rock that he knew would be a good place to stay. He began to trot. The dog kept the same distance behind him.

Then the bronze cuckoo began to call again from up near that overhanging rock. Now Socks trotted faster. The dog closed the distance between them a little.

They were nearly at the overhanging rock above Cascade Creek when the first raindrops started to fall. Socks went faster and came to shelter under the rock before he got really wet. Then he heard the dog howling.

He trotted back, nudged the dog towards the sheltering rock. The bronze cuckoo called again and was quiet. The black and blue dog lay down under the overhang, and after a while, Socks lay down beside him as the rain grew harder, and they were snug and warm. Black dog crept closer to Socks until they warmed each other. Then the thunder and lightning started.

The black and blue dog's name, given him by his stockman owner, was Lightning because he hated lightning and thunder, so with the first crash and flash of the storm he wriggled in closer to Socks. In his sleep Socks felt the warm dog against his chest, and without knowing he did it, wrapped his legs a little tighter around the dog. Crack, crash! went the thunder and lightning, and the dog growled. Down poured the rain, but they were warm and dry.

The storm blew and thundered all through the night, and it quietened just as

dawn was coming. The dog woke and gently licked Socks' nose.

Dawn came creeping over Paradise Hill, above the Cascade Valley. A few brumbies began to wander out of the sheltering bush. Lightning watched them. Socks made no move to join them. None of them were friends of his. In fact, he did not have any friends.

Suddenly he felt that Lightning was his friend, and these other horses might chase him. He had better watch out for Lightning, but he needed to get a drink. He stood up and moved out from under the rock. The other brumbies began moving towards him.

A small rabbit appeared, shaking rain out of its coat. Lightning was hungry and here was something to eat. He sprang after it. Socks watched him catch it and begin to eat. The other brumbies crept closer.

Lightning looked up and saw them. Perhaps they were coming after his food.

Low to the ground, he moved forward and then leapt after the leaders, rounding them up and sending them right up the valley. Socks watched with pleasure and amusement. He and Lightning were friends for life and the other brumbies should know it.

Just as the herd of brumbies went galloping up the snowgrass valley of the Cascade Creek, Socks saw a movement on a little mound opposite. There was a slab and shingle hut there, he knew, and the door of the hut flew open. Two men burst out.

'Lightning, come 'ere,' one yelled.

Lightning stopped dead and swung round to where he knew Socks was standing.

Socks found himself neighing to the dog — his friend — and, in a second, Lightning sprang around, picked up his half-eaten young rabbit, and tore back towards Socks. The two of them crept off together through the wet scrub to another good hiding place that Socks had seen before.

If only they don't have dogs to look for us, Socks thought, and turned his head down to nose Lightning. The dog licked his nose, then jumped up and put a paw on Socks' leg.

They would be friends now forever.

Socks stopped for a minute at a little pool and had a drink. Lightning ate the remaining hind leg of his rabbit and felt much better. Now they could go on to whatever lay ahead.

Plenty lay ahead.

Socks suspected that the two men would saddle up their horses and come after them. Lightning had the same sort of feeling, and there was no way that he was going to be caught. *His* owner had died, he knew that, and the voice of the

man who had called his name was that of a bad man. He had seen him in action before and he didn't want anything to do with him. Now that he had a good friend he meant to stick to him.

When they stopped once for Socks to listen and wonder, Lightning put up a paw to Socks' dear face.

Then the two friends went on, creeping rather silently along the hillsides till they came to a cavern that Socks knew existed. A good shelter should it storm again, and well hidden.

A flock of black cockatoos flew overhead. They knew, just like Socks and Lightning did, that more bad weather was coming. Any tracks Socks and Lightning might have made would be washed out.

A spring gushed out of the hill just below their cave and ran round a swamp into quite a large creek.

They had a good hiding place. There were plenty of seed-bearing bushes surrounding a little grassy flat where rabbits usually played. Socks and Lightning would have enough food for a few days and plenty of water, and the call of the bronze cuckoo to tell them to stay.

It was the start of Socks' life of being the wildest brumby of them all. Socks and Lightning's great combination was of brains and cunning, of teeth and hooves.

Lightning had loved his master, the master who whistled like a bronze cuckoo, but he had learnt enough about men and cattle to be determined not to be caught again by any others. He and Socks would be quite a fearsome team: a fighting dog, and maybe a fighting brumby. A pair that knew the mountains well.

Rain began again, then came the first roll of thunder.

The two men had followed in their general direction, but found no tracks. Now Lightning was snug and warm with Socks. His old master had called him Lightning but had always comforted him in a storm. Now Socks comforted him when there was thunder and lightning. Lightning felt safe and happy with Socks and, for the first time in his loner's life, Socks felt secure in companionship with Lightning.

They stayed in their cave.

A low growl from Lightning told Socks that the men had come fairly close, then turned back. One man's voice drifted up to him.

'I'd like that dog — a real good worker.'

Another voice answered: 'E mightn't work for you. Forget it!'

'You're right. Let's go back.'

The sky was bright with lightning; the dog crept closer against Socks. Socks



nosed him gently. No-one was going to harm Lightning.

Thunder crashed, but they heard the men turn back. Lightning stayed very quiet. Time, later, to get up and hunt another rabbit when they came out to play.

By evening a greenish rift came in the clouds; the storm might be over. Horse and dog stood at the cave opening looking out. Then Socks made up his mind, nosed Lightning to follow, and set off to the ridge above. There was no track, but the going would be good for quite some distance.

Socks knew the way well. There might be a track of sorts up the Leatherbarrel Creek, but he did not know if there would be other horses owning that deep valley.

There would be water, and shrubs to eat, but he really did not know if there would be rabbits for Lightning to hunt. Surely there would be rabbits?

He turned his head to touch Lightning, glad of his company. Lightning was glad, too, and jumped up to greet him. A bar of sunlight fell on the dog's coat, showing up the touch of blue on his shoulder — blue heeler, savage but faithful — and a touch of dingo with his pricked ears. Socks went on happily.

The scrub was getting more dense. They crossed two small creeks. Lightning splashed about, catching floating leaves and sticks, then he snapped up a little rainbow trout, but he wasn't really sure how to eat it.

They now crossed a bigger creek, the Leatherbarrel, and then the going got rougher, more difficult, with thick grevillea shrubs, difficult for Lightning to move through. Even Socks' legs got tangled up, but on they went.

Then, through the snow gum branches, Socks saw a stallion standing on a snowgrass spur that came down off the Ramshead. The stallion looked fairly fierce, and a few shadowy mares were melting into the bush behind him.

Lightning gave a deep growl.

The stallion seemed to offer a fight. Socks wasn't really interested in fighting that powerful-looking stallion. He only wanted to clear any brumbies out of the head of the Leatherbarrel Creek, so he trotted up purposefully.

Lightning knew immediately what he meant to do, and shot past him, barking. The stallion stood for a moment, astonished. Then he turned and galloped away, Lightning nipping at his heels. Socks went after him too, got round him, but then, as the stranger stopped, he realised he could leave Lightning to deal with him because as the strange stallion stood still Lightning sprang and fastened his teeth in his nose. The stallion shook him off, but Socks was there to chase him up the valley, striking at him.

The stallion stopped once and turned on Socks, striking him sharply above the shoulder. Socks grabbed him on the wither and just then Lightning sprang at his nose again. The stallion shook him off and went tearing up a faint brumby

track to one side of the headwall, following his mares.

Lightning and Socks followed up on their advantage, Lightning getting in some savage bites on the stallion's heels.

Socks looked up as he heard a mare neighing, and just saw them on the very edge of the headwall. The next time he looked up he saw the big stallion nearly level with the headwall. Then he heard wild neighing and stood still to watch. The mares barely took time to greet their stallion as he crested the edge of the headwall before they turned and galloped out of sight.

Lightning had his nose pointing to the west, and the low rumbling in his throat told Socks that there was danger coming. Then he looked up further and saw a menacing black cloud gathering in the west and coming towards the mountains. Where to go — up or down? There seemed to be no good cover.

It was the dog who had seen an umbrella-shaped snow gum, the dog who knew immediately there was snow coming. It was Lightning who remembered sheltering under the snow gum with his master and his master's stock horse.

He led his friend to the tree on the lee side of a deep gully, and he and Socks crept below the overhanging branches. Lightning immediately lay down, but there were tears squeezing out of his eyes as he thought of that other time he lay in this place. Socks nudged his ears and lay down beside him, cradling him with his legs.

Both horse and dog slept, and did not hear the soft falling of snowflake into snow. Later the blizzard grew heavier, but they slept on.

What woke them in the end was the sound of horses slithering and sliding down the mountain beside the headwall.

Lightning was the first to peer out, and his furious bark disturbed Socks. Socks and Lightning peered out of their igloo of snow and beheld a strange sight.

They saw the two stockmen from the Cascades riding up from the foot of the valley, and just below the igloo was the mob of four brumbies: three mares and one stallion, the stallion looking very angry.

Lightning's hackles rose.

He saw the men, too, and leapt out of his snow igloo. Barking wildly, he mustered up the brumbies and drove them down on to the two men.

Socks saw the two stockhorses rear up in fright, and realising that surprise was of great value he burst out in a cloud of snow and joined in the chase.

The men had whips, but took a while to control their horses and crack their whips. By that time the galloping brumbies had turned into a stampede, sweeping up the stockmen before them.

Lightning had command of the situation, biting heels indiscriminately and

barking whenever he could get his breath back. He knew there were stockman's tracks out of the Leatherbarrel Creek on either side. 'Big Mick' and 'Little Mick' they were called, steep and shaley. If only he could swing the stampeding horses around and send them up Little Mick, they'd go down the other side and never stop!

But there was only the one crossing place of the creek. Socks woke up to what the dog was trying to do, and he began to gallop faster, and scream.

Little Mick was also an old brumby track, and the stallion headed up it with his mares in a cloud of flying gravel and shale. The two riders were swept along with them. Lightning bit some more heels. He had never seen anything like it in his life, and *he* had made it happen!

At the top of the Leatherbarrel Spur one of the stockman's horses was intent on bolting in earnest. Lightning put on a burst of speed, jumped up and bit the horse on his hock. That was it, the horse was off!

When Socks and Lightning finally stopped at the end of Little Mick, Lightning had just enough energy left to grin and Socks, in between great sucks of breath, rubbed his head along the dog in praise.

Then they turned and slithered back down Little Mick, but where to now?

They were both a little nervous of the Cascades. There were too many tales of that ghost horse, Thowra, the Silver Brumby, and as for Lightning, his old master had died somewhere near there.

Socks headed back to his cave.

Lightning was quite happy to go along with him. *He* knew all about that silver horse who appeared and then vanished — galloped into a willy-willy of snow — but somehow he felt an aura of friendliness about that ghost, if ghost it really were. He had even seen the silver horse suddenly become a white hawk, but was it a horse or a hawk? Whatever it was, it was friendly to a dog that was a true one-man dog.

They settled into the cave as though it were their own, which perhaps it was.

Actually, Socks did wonder about all the other stories he had heard: the son of the silver horse — or grandson; the stories of the great-grandson who was befriended by an eagle and a silver dingo pup. Where did they live? There were stories of a herd of white horses that travelled by night, and had red eyes that could see well in the dark.

Socks went to sleep in his own cave, and in his sleep he dreamed of travelling over miles of mountains with Lightning, and he felt that he and Lightning were quite safe together.

Lightning whimpered occasionally in his sleep, dreaming of his dead master, and each time Socks comforted him with a gentle, trembling nose.

In the morning they set forth for Quambat Flat and the high, pointed mountain above it.

Socks was almost sure they would find other brumbies had *their* bimbles there, but he was also certain that he and Lightning would find an area for themselves.

They went up slowly from Quambat Flat, skirting round the head of Quambat Creek, where usually there were brumbies, and striking steeply upwards.

There on the top were dead trees that Lightning remembered, dead and bleached, all blown one way as if they had been struck dead by a silver staining blast of wind (stiff silver blowing hair in a fierce wind) and a straight line between the living trees and the dead.

It was eerie, but surely they would find good shelter in among the living trees; there were some rocks, too. Lightning led off to the north, and the belt of living snow gums. No other horses seemed to be near, until they saw a huge chestnut stallion hastening in a westerly direction.

Let him go! thought Socks. He won't trouble us. Something else on his mind. But Socks did keep wondering why that chestnut stallion was hurrying. Then Lightning stopped in his tracks and looked down towards Suggan Buggan. At the same time Socks heard the sound of a horseshoe ringing against stones.

A shod horse meant danger. It meant brumby hunters, because Socks knew there were no herds of cattle in the summer mountains like there used to be.

Then they saw the shod horses, heard men's voices. Socks felt transfixed by their gaze.

'Black with four white socks,' he heard a voice say, then he began to back into the low snow gums, but Lightning had other ideas. He had managed to get those two stockmen's horses to bolt along with the brumbies. He would try again.

With a wild fearsome barking, Lightning leapt out from behind Socks. He charged down on the three stockhorses. Socks watched, horrified, and then gathered himself together and hurtled down the steep slope.

'What the hell,' one voice called out, and raised his stockwhip to crack it at Lightning.

Socks felt fury rise right up inside him. How dare they aim a whip at Lightning!

The stones that he displaced in his mad gallop flew through the air, striking the horses below before they too began to charge downhill.

Lightning was there, snapping and biting, and Socks leapt in, striking with his forefeet, but Lightning did the most damage and Lightning it was who

terrified the horses. A very rough scree of boulders slackened the speed of the stockmen's horses for a little. Socks had got in some pretty good bites himself, but then leapt into the rough scree, striking at each of the horses.

The three stockmen tried to get away, but there was Lightning attacking them too, terrifying their horses. One horse lamed itself on a boulder and it went limping away.

Lightning and Socks then withdrew into the belt of snow gums, determined to find a hiding place and shelter for the night.

A man's voice floated up: 'That blue heeler lookin' dog is that bugger Lightnin' who the men from Cascade Creek said started the stampede down Leatherbarrel Spur. I wonder where the Omeo brumby hunters are — they say that one of them boasts he's going to catch his one thousandth this year. Could be that one with Lightnin'.'

Lightning heard his name, but did not realise that word about his ferocity was beginning to travel around the mountains.

Hearing a man's voice saying his name had suddenly made him think of his old master.

He kept close to Socks as they sought out a good sleeping place. On top of a mountain like the Pilot there would be plenty of ways of escape, even if stories *had* gone around about the ferocity of the dog and brumby.

## Two

After a while Socks and Lightning realised that The Pilot was not such a very safe place. It seemed to be that parties of men with whips and dogs came in from the Limestone area. Twice they drove a small mob of brumbies out the way they had come.

Socks watched carefully, and wondered. There were no cattle — only a mob of wild horses being driven south. Perhaps they mustered them up in the valleys and brought them back via Quambat Flat, but it really might be better to find a safe place in the Ingegoodbee Valley.

Socks remembered it as a wide valley with beautiful candlebark trees. He took Lightning off in the night. It was quite a long way, but somehow they were glad to be going, and Lightning gambolled along. Somewhere, far ahead, a bronze cuckoo called, and that gave Lightning even greater joy. Socks bent his head down and nuzzled him. Even though Socks felt that the promise contained in the bronze cuckoo's call would never be fulfilled, he, too, linked the cuckoo's whistle with the vision of Lightning sitting by his dead master. He did a few dancing steps to join in Lightning's play.

They made it to those pools that are the head of the Ingegoodbee River, as the full moon rose and was reflected in the water like a silver ball. Lightning splashed in to try to get it. Then they went on, down the Ingegoodbee until they reached the wide valley and the candlebarks that Socks remembered, and there the bronze cuckoo was calling to the moon as though it were spring.

Socks remembered one particular candlebark that had a big hollow at the base of its trunk and he was searching for that, but Lightning seemed to go straight for it as though he knew it was there.

Socks realised Lightning was going towards the tree, and that as he got closer he went more cautiously, almost on tiptoes. Lightning stopped, head on one side, listening.

Socks' ears flickered back and forth. Surely there was the whimper of something young and perhaps rather lost. At the sound, Lightning went a little bit faster, then stopped, peering into the entrance of the hollow, and went in, step by step, putting his nose down gently to something that was lying there.

Socks saw a little, female, part-dingo pup. Even surprised and shocked as he was, he realised she was beautiful — golden brown, with the fully pricked ears

that said dingo blood, the hint of a soft white ruff above the golden yellow coat. She was lying there whimpering until she saw the gentle-eyed, black and blue dog looking at her, and then his pink tongue licking her. Lightning's tail was wagging, telling his joy, almost saying to Socks, Look what we've found!, and just then the bronze cuckoo gave one final call to the moon.

Socks fitted into the hollow bole of the huge candlebark, there, near the Ingegoodbee River, and lay down beside Lightning, his dog, and the dear little girl dingo. The waning moon threw some long shadows but the three sleepers *and* the bronze cuckoo were lulled by the song of the river.

In the first light the two dogs leapt up to play. Socks watched, thinking it was strange that he had two companions now and he would never be lonely again. Obviously Lightning's little girl was going to bring joy.

There would be something else for the magpies to sing about now — the loner colt and the dog who sat guard over his dead master, and now the beautiful little part-dingo girl dog.

Magpies were not slow to take up the story, but the currawongs carried it further and faster, and the kookaburras laughed their way through many a meal of snake as they told the story of Socks' family.

It was the bronze cuckoo who told the whole story — the story of Lightning's adored master dying and leaving Lightning sitting beside his dead body; the bereft dog listening for the call of the bronze cuckoo, following the call of the cuckoo to the valley of the Ingegoodbee River, and to the hollow tree in which Lightning found the girl pup.

Far and wide the story went, till it got back to the brumbies at the Cascades and Leatherbarrel. No one knew how the stockmen who had bolted beside the brumbies down Leatherbarrel Spur got hold of the story, but they arrived back at the Cascades hut with one horse very lame. The story never had anything added to it because Socks and the two dogs stayed playing at the Ingegoodbee.

One thing which did get told was that the man from Benambra was vowing to catch his one thousandth brumby this year.

Somehow Socks knew it would happen.

Two of the stockmen from south of the border wended their way to the Tin Mines and then down the Ingegoodbee.

Socks had been dreaming of strange horses appearing and then they were there having made no sound, but suddenly the ring of a bridle bit. Socks melted into some tea tree that overhung the river, and Lightning called the little girl dingo-dog, but she didn't understand the danger and splashed along the river towards him. The only thing for Socks to do was to call Lightning, and hope the

beautiful girl dog would follow. Socks rushed across the river and thankfully Lightning and the pup followed.

‘Look, look!’ one of the men yelled, but then they were floundering through the water, and too busy keeping their horses on their feet. By the time both men and horses were across the river, Socks and his following of Lightning and Miss Dingo had vanished into grevillea scrub and prosanthera.

Socks led on in the general direction of the Tin Mines.

Suddenly he became aware that there were other brumbies ahead of him, so he collected Lightning and Miss Dingo and veered south, then stood quite still till the stockmen following went past. Socks and his two dogs sneaked back to the Ingegoodbee, going further down the river to the Pinch, and there they *did find* a good, warm cave — well hidden, and with room for two dogs and one horse.

Socks had got used to having to consider the size of his ‘family,’ and there was something else he had got used to — his extremely protective feeling for the little Miss Dingo.

Lightning went in first, sniffing it all out, then he called her in and Socks followed. Lightning turned round two or three times after scratching himself a hollow, then he lay down and sniffed at Miss Dingo till she curled up beside him. Socks lay down too, folding his legs around the snoozing dogs. All was well.

They slept, only Lightning aware that men would now be after them. Socks, of course, knew only too well that they had all been seen and noted as a strange combination. He knew, and so did Lightning, that life might not be really peaceful — anyway, there was a strange feeling throughout the bush, perhaps caused by the threat of brumby hunters.

That night dingoes howled to the moon, but the little Miss only snuggled in closer and gave Socks a loving lick on the nose.

Socks determined to take his ‘family’ right away from the men who had seen them.

After all, they didn’t go very far, only to the hollow tree that was ‘home’ to Socks and Lightning. Miss Dingo loved the hollow — it was as if *she* chose it — and they were undisturbed by men or dogs. Lightning seemed so much more settled, and the Ingegoodbee was a great place to spend the summer.

There would be rabbits for the dogs, and grass and shrubs for Socks, so all the family were quite content. Occasionally Lightning seemed to dream of that dead stockman, but when he whimpered in his sleep, and when tears rolled down his dear nose, Socks nudged his ears or Miss Dingo licked his face all over, and the ‘wild’ family were very happy.



One evening, at dusk, peace was broken. Two men on horses came from the south collecting a mob of brumbies. Socks and the dogs were playing in the wide Ingegoodbee Valley, and were seen.

Two of the men saw them among the candlebarks, then came thundering after them.

Socks went straight for the river, trying to lure the chase after him. He soon realised that they were after the two dogs, so in boiling anger he chased the men. Miss Dingo was heading for her hollow tree. Lightning suddenly swung round to hunt the two brumby hunters, and was leaping at the stockhorses' noses when Socks attacked them from behind. The double attack was too much for one of the horses; it turned and bolted under branches, through scrub and around trees. Socks pursued the victory, hunting both horses with bared teeth and, occasionally, flailing hooves.

He knew he had left Lightning behind, but once he had made sure the two stockhorses were bolting out of control, he turned back to find him.

He did not want to take the chance of leading any hunters towards the hollow — feeling sure that that was where little Miss Dingo had gone — so he went a roundabout way. When he reached the mouth of the hollow, there was Lightning standing guard and whimpering slightly. Other whimpers came from inside.

Socks nosed Lightning, who put up a bleeding paw. Then he peered into the hollow. There was a wriggling mass of puppies, and Miss Dingo proudly licking them, but she was also obviously very tired. She growled a little at the sight of Socks, and snapped at Lightning, but soon welcomed them both in — but not too close.

Socks was almost horrified. What sort of a family was this? He tried to work it out and later, as Miss Dingo moved a bit, he saw there were only two puppies.

By morning she was proud and happy and had got over the fright of being chased by the two big horses. Lightning went off to hunt. He caught a rabbit which he proudly put beside Miss Dingo's nose. Then he helped her skin a hind leg. She gobbled it down and suddenly Lightning was happy. Socks went off grazing.

Once Miss Dingo ceased to hunt Lightning away from the pups, he began to feel pleasure and pride in them.

### Three

For a while, when the pups had grown a bit, they all continued hunting and playing as a pack. Miss Dingo's pups were very pretty ... a faint blue tinge in their ruff, showing their blue heeler inheritance from Lightning, and their hunting ability telling of their dingo forebears.

Socks moved his family to the cave near the Cascades. There was room for them all, and good hunting, so they lived there for a while, Socks proudly hunting with them, and driving away any brumby chasers.

After a while Socks began to recognise two men who came more than most — realised that they were watching his 'family'. Lightning was disturbed too, feeling that those men kept looking for *them*. One of the men carried a lasso. One horse had an unusual offside hoof print. Lightning watched for it closely.

One day, after light rain, he saw hoof marks quite near the hidden mouth of the cave. He made sure Socks saw them too, by keeping on sniffing at them. When Socks sniffed at the queerly-shaped hoof mark, Lightning gave a low growl to indicate his anxiety. Then he gathered up little Miss Dingo and her pups and stood ready to go, wherever Socks thought best. Obviously the men would find them sooner or later.

Socks knew he had to take his family somewhere else, but where would he find a good hiding place? There were lots of rocky tors in the Ramshead Range, but too much open country between them. Then he wondered about the grassy ridge down off the North Ramshead — could there be a hollow to one side of that ridge? There must be the head of a little creek. This would be the way to go, up, now, on to the Ramshead Range and then over the edge into the Leatherbarrel, keeping above the thick scrub. There might not, of course, be much for the dingo family or Lightning to hunt.

Anyway, Socks thought, let's go!

He gave Lightning a friendly tug on one ear, and led off upwards and upwards till they reached the old cattle track over Dead Horse Gap. Lightning showed his pleasure in being on the move again by jumping up and licking Socks' nose. Miss Dingo showed her excitement by rolling over on her back in front of Socks. The pups were galloping about and rolling in the snowgrass.

Both Socks and Lightning stopped often to listen for anything following them and to hear any message told by the birds.

There was a strange silence.

The snow gum leaves were moving slightly above the old hut at Dead Horse Gap; the Bogong Creek rippled over stones with the lovely song of a mountain creek. All was well.

Feeling happier, Lightning and Socks led Miss Dingo and her pups up the faint track above the hut. Socks looked back occasionally and felt a sense of pride in his family. The pups were splashing water off their coats from a plunge into the Bogong Creek, and madly galloping along behind, or racing through the leafy bossiaea scrub and the wide leaves of the blue flax lily, dodging round granite tors until Miss Dingo called them.

The ridge was steep and the pups got breathless and were glad to cool off in a large swamp that was one of the heads of the Bogong Creek. Socks looked at the swamp with care. There was indeed a dry-looking cave at the top of it, and big enough to hold him and his family if they didn't find anything further on, but he knew that he had a sort of longing for the spur into the Leatherbarrel Creek.

When they found the big snowgrass basin below the rocky tor of the South Ramshead, and looked over the edge into the Leatherbarrel, Lightning was prancing with joy.

Socks wondered if Lightning had been in this country with his dead master, the dog seemed so happy. Lightning *was* happy as he ran down the snowgrass spur, but suddenly he wanted Socks and Miss Dingo and the pups, but mostly Socks, and went racing back to where they were carefully examining a hollow at the head of the gully to one side of the ridge.

Socks saw him coming and went to meet him.

Lightning barked a greeting and stopped still, putting up one front paw to Socks' nose, and Socks knew exactly what his old friend was feeling, saw the tears in Lightning's eyes. Socks nudged his friend's ears, rubbed his head against Lightning's, and was pleased to see the dog cheer up and wag his tail. Socks rubbed his head all the harder, then proudly led him to look at the new cave for the family. Lightning walked in beside him and looked around, then lay down and put up his paw to Socks and gave a small, inviting whimper.

Socks put his nose down to receive a loving lick, and he lay down beside his beloved friend. Just then came Miss Dingo, followed by her pups, to give Socks and their father a tumultuous greeting in what was now, obviously, a new family cave, then they, too, curled themselves up for a brief sleep — only brief because their energy was enormous.

There was a nice smell of prosanthera from the mint bush that grew around the cave.

Food, of course, was the immediate problem, but Socks had already seen a

few rat tracks going across the snowgrass into the low-growing heath bushes. He had no doubt that little Miss Dingo and Lightning would soon take the pups hunting.

They would sleep now, till evening.

Evening brought the first piece of good luck. A very curious young rat came right to the entrance of the cave. Miss Dingo heard it, or smelt it, before even Lightning, and she sprang up and killed it for her two pups. After they had eaten it she must have thought it was time to stop sleeping and see what else they could hunt, so she stirred Lightning from his sleep and made him come. Socks came out and lay on the snowgrass spur and watched.

Miss Dingo could teach Lightning a good deal about hunting, good, efficient hunter though he was. Miss Dingo knew how to track rats through the horizontal grevillea that grew on the banks of the creek and could pounce so quickly that the rat never knew what had hit it. Miss Dingo brought it to her pups, but Lightning proudly brought his catch back to Socks.

Socks did not care for rats, but he realised by the way that Lightning presented it to him that it was given with pride and pleasure, so he rubbed his head on Lightning, put one forefoot on the rat and tore off a hind leg, giving it to the drooling Lightning.

It was the correct thing to do; Lightning was delighted, and licked Socks' nose before he finished the rest of the rat.

It was then that Socks heard dogs barking in the darkness, and he hastily gathered up his family into the cave and said to Lightning, 'lie down, and be quiet'. Lightning ordered Miss Dingo — *and* the pups — to lie still and be quiet.

So they huddled together till the night grew dark and there were no more worrying noises.

## Four

During the days that followed they travelled further into the mountains. They only saw an occasional bushwalker, none that offered any danger.

But bushwalkers did, of course, spread the story in Jindabyne of a black brumby with white socks and a family of dog and dingoes, and that story got people out looking for them for that family was a little unusual.

Only a few people had seen the black horse, Socks, shepherding his family across the Snowy River. Just a few had reported seeing this big horse breaking the force of the river's current while the dingo mother and pups swam across, and pulling the smallest pup out of the water by the scruff of her neck.

There was one story told, round the rodeo at Jindabyne, of this 'Socks' going for another stallion who had attacked the part-blue heeler dog.

Socks remembered that day clearly. The family had worked their way back to the Tin Mine country and the Ingegoodbee, which they regarded as really 'home', when this big chestnut stallion suddenly went for Lightning.

Socks was standing on the edge of the forest looking at Lightning watching over the pups, when this big stallion crept up on him.

Socks saw the chestnut strike at Lightning and suddenly his vision was suffused with red as he raced to save Lightning, and he felt as he had never felt before, that Lightning was *his*, and desperately loved.

He leapt between the stallion and the dog, open-mouthed, teeth bared, and grabbed the stallion by the wither, shaking him with all his strength. Then he dropped him and struck him on the side of his head. He saw Lightning unhurt and aiming to get the stallion by the nose, but *he* should grab him by the wither again, kill him, anything, to drive him away, forever.

It was the same stallion from Suggan Buggan. He did drive him away, and Lightning chased that chestnut too, but Socks stood and waited for Lightning ... to rub his head on Lightning, and have Lightning lick *his* nose.

It was time, then, to check on Miss Dingo and her pups and when they were found and unhurt they, all four, went together and found the hollow tree where the pups had been born and there they all curled up together and slept.

Socks slept very lightly, waking quite often, and listening for any strange sounds. Then suddenly through the night there came echoing dingo howls. There were so many dingoes, and the howls were echoing all around, that Socks got up

without disturbing Lightning and went to the opening of the hollow to listen, wondering what had disturbed them.

He could hear the rising sound of wind.

He looked around, his body blocking the wind from entering the hollow. Lightning was stirring; maybe a thunderstorm was coming.

Poor Lightning still hated a thunderstorm even though he was very happy in his family. Socks took a step further in and put a comforting nose down to the dog's head. Lightning put up a paw to his horse to make a loving contact. The branches of the candlebark were beginning to creak and groan in the wind.

As Socks listened he heard a dingo howl from much closer. Lightning growled. Then the shape of a big dingo showed faintly in the opening. Far away a mopoke said: 'Beware. Beware.'

The big dingo took a few creeping steps in, towards the smallest pup, the little female.

Socks took a swipe at the dingo and it growled fiercely, which alerted Lightning and also Miss Dingo. Lightning sprang at the marauding dingo, as did Miss Dingo. Suddenly there was a snarling mass of dog and dingoes and a furious Socks. Lightning, knowing that little Miss was desperate to save her pup, and quite desperate himself, grabbed the fierce dingo by one ear and hung on. The marauder had a great mouthful of the little pup's neck and was trying to drag her away.

Socks awaited his opportunity in that maelstrom of moving dog and dingoes, and when the way was suddenly clear, he bent his neck and grabbed an enormous mouthful of skin and flesh down the backbone of the mad, bad dingo.

That strategy worked. The furious dingo yelled with pain and had to let go the pup, who scrambled behind her mother.

Socks threw his mouthful of dingo out of the hollow. Lightning went too, still attached to the dingo's ear, but the dingo was severely damaged and Lightning intended to finish him off well away from the tree.

Lightning did indeed finish him off, and the mopoke had another story to tell of the ferocity of Socks' family.

Plovers called their sad dirge down by the river where the casuarinas dipped to the water, but the dingoes and Socks slept secure in the knowledge of another danger overcome.

The bronze cuckoo sounded his call once more in the night, though there was no moon. Lightning cocked his ears and put his head on one side, then threw a joyous bark towards the bird. Suddenly Socks felt impelled to throw his happy neigh towards the bird, too, to tell that bronze cuckoo — perhaps for the bronze cuckoo to relay a message to that old dead stockman — 'All is well.'

Socks was glad that Lightning had killed that marauding dingo, so that he would not be a menace to Miss Dingo's female pup.

That was *one* menace to life and limb that no longer existed.

Socks heard a flight of black cockatoos settling for the night in a big candlebark that was near *their* tree. He was glad to hear them because they would have known if there were any strange animals about, or they would not have settled. He knew there were emus further upstream, but emus were unlikely to harm Miss Dingo or her pups. Socks went into their hollow tree, received his lick on the nose from Lightning, and settled down to sleep with *his* family.

It was the next night that his sleep was so disturbed by dreams of all that Ramshead Range, all the rock tors of that country and the strange little soaks that lay in the flat ground in between. Surely there would be rock caverns where he and his family could shelter?

He dreamed of going over Dead Horse Gap again, crossing the cattle track, passing the old yards and the old hut.

So in the morning they set forth — restless, eager — along the Ingegoodbee River and up the old track to the Cascades. They aimed to sleep that night in their old cave, or maybe go further still, up Dead Horse Ridge to that swamp above Bogong Creek.

Before they even reached the Cascades, and in amongst the enormous alpine ash near Packsaddle Gap, there was a herd of brumbies and three men on horses trying to muster them and drive them down the Cascades Spur to Tom Groggin.

Socks and Lightning saw them well before they were seen themselves. Lightning saw the stockhorses and the mob of brumbies spreading on either side of the track ahead of them, and felt in his whole self the joy of chasing horses, men and brumbies, as he had felt it down the Leatherbarrel Spur.

He began to dance a little, and then suddenly shot out from behind Socks and went around the mob of brumbies, swinging them back on to the track, hurrying them on their way.

Socks was not sure what to do.

For a moment there was no sound from the men, then there was a rather surprised shout of, 'Come 'ere be'ind,' but Lightning was enjoying himself and, really, hoping to start a stampede.

Then Lightning did come behind, but not before he had the leading brumbies going out of control. Then he came behind the stockhorses.

Socks knew exactly what Lightning was doing. He was going to try to repeat the Leatherbarrel Spur stampede and it looked as if he might succeed.

Socks joined in at a thundering gallop, straight for the stockhorses, his mouth

open, screaming.

The brumbies were galloping all across the mountainside above and through the alpine ash into little tea tree bush creeks, and presently, one of the stockmen, his horse virtually bolting out of control, began to gallop up above them. They would need two to swing that mob down the Cascade Spur on to the Murray River.

‘Swing ’em, swing ’em,’ one man shouted, and ahead the two men were cracking whips and turning the leading brumbies down the wide Cascade Spur.

‘River’ll steady ’em,’ another shouted, but Socks never saw if they steadied or not. The mob were stampeding down that precipitous spur. He neighed to Lightning and Lightning dropped back to him and they joined Miss Dingo and her rather nervous pups.

Lightning had enjoyed himself, but was pleased to come back to Socks and was glad to get praise. Miss Dingo and her pups joined in for the praise and head rubbing from Socks.

Also, Lightning knew that they were still heading for the high country and had communicated his excitement to the dingo family. So when Socks turned upwards toward the Cascades Valley, they all came leaping and bounding along. Everyone was happy. Socks knew he had been part of one of the funniest musters he had ever seen.

He was also aware that he had never seen those men and horses and dogs before, which was just as well, because those men might not forget Lightning’s mustering act in a hurry. Anyway, he and Lightning and his family were heading for the Ramsheads. These men must have come across the border for the brumbies, and if they got that lot home they would be busy for a while.

They crossed the Cascades Creek near the end of the valley and hurried along till they reached the track up to Bob’s Garden, and then on to Dead Horse Ridge, the Gap and the old hut. By this time even the pups knew they were on an exciting journey and they happily rolled in the snowgrass tussocks on the Gap.

Socks hurried them on across the open Gap. The only danger might be from brumbies, but Socks would feel better if there were more cover so they hurried up behind the hut and into the few trees.

There was a faint track to follow and the purple hovea was still in flower all through the bush. Socks nibbled on the ripening buds of the golden bossiaea. A scent of the mingled wildflowers rose around, and as they reached the flat part of the ridge there was a sudden sweetness to the scent. Socks raised his head and smelt the air. One or two of the snow gums were flowering; after all, it must be midsummer.

The track went round the big rock and through a few bushes and they trotted



on to the flatter part of the ridge, the broad stretch of snowgrass and wide-spaced snow gums and creamy blossoms coming into flower with their honey scent.

The family edged their way over to the cave above the swamp.

Lightning was quite glad to curl up peacefully. Socks kept watch, and the dingo family played, rolling in the snowgrass. There was a tall candlebark flowering in the swamp. The pups had great fun hiding from each other and pouncing out from behind a big clump. Then Miss Dingo saw a rat and pounced on it. It was on for the three dingoes, and, finally, Lightning couldn't resist joining in the hunt, until he had caught three rats and brought them to Socks.

With each one, Socks pulled off a hind leg and offered it to a glad and grateful Lightning.

As dusk came, the hunting grew even more fast and furious. The little boy pup went further away, hunting, and after one long foray, when Miss Dingo grew anxious and called him, he returned with a rabbit which he proudly gave to his mother.

At daybreak Socks woke and stirred his family. It was time to set forth to the Ramsheads. So the cavalcade left their cave and headed up through the last of the snow gums, disturbing the red-tipped pardalote that lived on the little rock knoll with its four snow gums.

When they reached the top of the South Ramshead they peered over, but Socks was set on reaching all the rock tors up above, and the little peaty pools, remembering once, long ago, seeing a blue yabby's claw in a pool. Perhaps he might catch a live yabby to give to Miss Dingo. Socks was very happy. He wasn't a hunter but he might just catch a broad-toothed rat and give it to Lightning.

Not long after dawn they were up on that high land between all the rock tors, and the first thing Socks saw was a blue claw in one pool. Maybe the rest of his wishes might come true.

He kept looking for a good place to camp and he knew Lightning was looking for one, too. It was while they were looking into a large place under piled-up rocks that Socks saw a rat preening its whiskers, and without thinking, he reared up and brought his forefeet down *whack!* on the rat. Then he grabbed it and offered it to Lightning. Lightning fairly danced with pleasure and excitement. He patted Socks' nose then took almost all of the big fat rat to Miss Dingo and her pups.

It was soon after that that the live blue yabby appeared, but it was Lightning who caught the yabby, and, realising that Socks might not like to eat it, went and picked three snow daisies and took them to Socks.

As Socks was eating the snow daisies he was studying the northern sky. A huge black cloud was gathering, looking as if it promised snow.

Snow in summer! It could happen, and that big flight of black cockatoos going down into the Crackenback Valley might have meant something. He chewed happily on the snow daisies and watched Lightning galloping about. Once, Lightning stopped in mid-stride, and stood staring towards the storm cloud that was gradually spreading all over the blue sky. He noticed that Socks was hyped-up by the coming storm, noticed him shy as if something had passed by very close. It was as though a ghost had passed by. Did a silver horse gallop towards the west?

Lightning came racing back to him, as though disturbed by something. Socks rubbed his head on his back and felt the dog quieten down. The dingo family were rolling in the heath and in the peat bogs but they, too, seemed disturbed, stopping their play often to look towards the dark cloud, or to look towards Socks as though for reassurance.

It was rain to start with, and then a cloud of snow seemed to rush towards them. It was evening by then, and out of the dark west came this smothering white cloud. Socks and Lightning knew what it was, but the dingo family were puzzled and gladly followed Socks and Lightning into the shelter of the rock.

Before long, however, snow began to lie on the ground. Lightning called the dingo family out and soon they were all rolling in the soft white magic, grabbing big mouthfuls of it, and wondering why it vanished.

It became the most marvellous stuff in which to play. The dingoes rolled and jumped around and kicked up the fluffy snow. Lightning joined in the fun, rolling the puppies in the deepening snow. Socks watched from the shelter of the rocks.

It was a queer storm because it had been snowing for quite a while, but thunder rolled and rumbled.

The old bushies always said, 'Thunder in winter means snow', but here was the snow in summer followed by thunder. Now there was going to be lightning flashing around the granite tors. Lightning knew it was coming, so he called all his dingo family into quite a large rocky cavern where there was room for Socks, too. By that time Lightning needed comforting. He saw Socks lie down and gathered his little Miss and her pups together to lie against Socks. He whimpered slightly, but there was Socks' dear face right beside his head.

Socks looked out once and saw forked lightning above one rocky tor, then he went back to his family, particularly to comfort his dog.

When the fiercest of the lightning had died down, Socks went to the opening of their rock hollow to look out. Snow was still falling. It was midsummer and

cold, so cold. Lightning suddenly split the sky over one of the rock tors and the snow still fell through the blinding flash. A sudden gust of air spiralled the snow upwards in the light.

The dogs had all come to stand beside him, and Lightning crouched between Socks' forefeet. Socks put his nose down to the quivering nose and tongue that came up to meet him, and then Miss Dingo led the way inside again for them all to lie down in a huddled heap till the storm was silenced.

Both Socks and Lightning were glad to be inside all curled up together, because, somehow, there were other spirits abroad in the thunder, lightning and snow.

A silver stallion in a willy-willy of snow, a silver horse simply galloping through the country which was his forever.

## Five

The snow on the ground kept bushwalkers away for a while. The rocks were slippery, and it was very easy to go into a snow-covered hole, but it was lovely snow in which dingoes and a dog like Lightning could play. Even Socks rolled in the snow with his family, and there was no one to see — except one walker who had scrambled up the slippery rocks of a tor to see the snow-covered Range at midsummer. He saw the astonishing sight of a black brumby with four white socks, a part-kelpie dog, and three part-dingoes, all scampering and rolling in the snow together.

That bushwalker mentioned it down in Jindabyne, and three stockmen listened to the tale because of the weird combination of animals, and one of them had heard the tale of the stampede of brumbies and stockhorses down the Leatherbarrel Spur, so he said, ‘Come on, let’s put our horses in my truck and then ride up Merritt’s Spur and see for ourselves.’

Socks and Lightning had both seen the bushwalker and both wondered about him. They all curled up under and between the sheltering rocky cavern that night, but Socks was anxious, and he stirred very early in the morning, waking the rest of the family and leading them off towards the North Ramshead, knowing that they had a line of escape from there.

The stockmen had driven their horses up in the truck the evening before and started up Merritt’s Spur that night, camping on the treeline, and leaving at first light. Luckily for Socks and his family, one of the stockhorses neighed as they disturbed sleeping black cockatoos, so they were warned.

Socks immediately thought of the cave on the Leatherbarrel Spur as a hiding place, but they would have to cross over some wide, open country before they could drop over the edge into the Leatherbarrel and then go down the open grass spur, in full view of any hunters.

In full view of what? Who?

Socks tried to lead his family along a half-hidden trail over the open top country, dodging round rocks and built-up tors, trying not to leave tracks on peat bogs.

The black cockatoos circled around, screaming, and disturbed a pair of nankeen kestrels. A hare sprang up and ran for its life, but Lightning had too much else on his mind. He had seen, and heard, behind them, the crashing of

stockhorses, and the shouting men. All he could think of was his beloved Socks being caught, or Miss Dingo.

He had to save them, all of them.

If only he could draw attention to himself at the moment Socks turned down the spur. He gauged the lie of the land quickly. There was a large tor ahead, well before the place where the spur turned down. He hid in those rocks and then rushed out at the stockmen's horses, desperately hoping that it would give time for Socks and the dingoes to vanish.

He sprang, snarling, from among the rocks. The stockhorses all shied. One stopped dead and then spun around, bucking.

Lightning got the one chance he needed to spring at the horse's nose, and sent it bolting away. Then he turned to attack the other two with wild barks.

Luckily, Socks saw Miss Dingo and her pups into the cave, and came leaping back to Lightning.

Socks had never been a fighter, but *now*, now, he had to save Lightning and he went at the two men and their horses as though he were crazy.

Every strike with a front hoof, every bite, found its mark.

The noise was tremendous; Socks' screams and Lightning's fearsome barks.

The first horse neighed from a long way off and the other two turned and bolted in the direction of the neigh.

Socks and Lightning stood watching them go. After licking a few wounds they went down to find the dingo family. Dog and horse were exhausted, but overjoyed to find the dingo family curled up safely in their cave.

Lightning lay down to rest with the dingoes, and his head on Socks' legs, but neither he nor Socks were entirely certain about their victory being one that would last. For some reason Socks kept thinking about that willy-willy of snow that he was sure was really a silver horse, or that horse's ghost. Surely that silver horse had some hiding place far away on the other side of the Crackenback River.

He knew of Baringa's Secret Valley, but he didn't want to try and hide there because of the brumby-hunting men who came from the south. He must lead his family across the head of the Crackenback and go over Paddy Rush's Bogong. It might be rough country for the dingo pups, but they would try it.

The dingoes were howling again that night, and everyone in the cave was very restless.

At some time in the night the little pups vanished.

Echoing off the Ramshead Rocks came a thrilling dingo howl, undoubtedly the howl that had called the pups, but it also had a slightly menacing note to it, and poor Miss Dingo was upset and worried. Lightning was furious. He knew

that Miss Dingo thought the dog with that howl was *bad*.

Socks went with them as they set off to find the pups. Miss Dingo was as desperately anxious as any mother whose daughter has been stolen by an undesirable suitor, but doubly worried in case some harm should come to her.

Lightning was worried in case there might be several dingoes, more than he could cope with on his own. Then, all of a sudden, with a gentle, snuffling touch from Socks' nose, he felt full of confidence — sure of himself, sure of his own abilities, and certain that Socks would support him. Gleefully he danced along, thinking of all the times he and Socks had made brumbies and stockhorses stampede.

It had been such *fun*. Now he was going to do battle for Miss Dingo and their lost pups! He thought of that horrible big dingo he and Socks had killed when it came into the cave for Miss Dingo's girl pup, and he jumped up happily to Socks.

On they went, through the night, following the dingo howls. They were going faster and faster and did not really seem to be getting nearer to the howls. Suddenly they heard a pup's call, sounding rather lost and closer to them than the dogs' howls.

Socks began to gallop, Lightning close beside, and Miss Dingo tore along, too.

Lightning was happy — he was going to save the pups for his darling Miss Dingo.

Then they found one little pup, crying, alone. Miss Dingo lay down beside her, licking her, comforting her, but Lightning, after a preliminary lick, took heed of the wild 'come hither' calls of the dingo who had spurned her. Lightning and Socks went tearing on till the 'come hither' calls were closer.

They passed a couple of dingo bitches along the way; they were obviously following the dingo's call. Socks picked one up and shook it before dropping it, as though to say, 'That'll teach you!', but he was saving his anger for the mad dog who had lured the young pup and then, when she showed fight, had left her.

Socks and Lightning both felt she was a dear little girl dog, and were determined to teach the dingo seducer some manners.

The howl rang out fairly close. Miss Dingo felt her daughter cringe with fear.

## Six

Socks and Lightning both saw the silhouette of the dingo against the starlit sky, and both bounded forward, each stride taking them closer to that savage dog. There was something sinister about that dingo — sinister and cruel.

Socks got there first, and sent the dingo flying with one blow from a foreleg, and Lightning was there to catch the dingo as it flew through the air.

Snap! went Lightning's powerful jaw. Then he shook it. Then he dropped it for a moment. It lay there without showing fight. One of its ears was torn and bleeding, and Lightning recognised the pup's teeth marks. He figured out that the little girl pup had shown fight instead of loving compliance, and had been left behind because of her self-protective ability. Lightning felt proud; she was *his* daughter, as well as his darling Miss Dingo's. She belonged to his and Socks' family! And there was Socks beside him, standing over the cowardly dingo.

Socks wrinkled up his nose in true stallion manner, and arched his neck threateningly. Then he had an idea! He picked up the dingo by the scruff of the neck and proceeded to carry it back to where Miss Dingo was comforting her pup. The pup was really unharmed and got to her feet when Socks arrived with his chastened burden, and Lightning proceeded to give the cowardly dog a good thrashing.

Then the family turned for home. They met the male pup on the way, gathered him into the family group, and followed Socks to the Crackenback River to find something over the river and far away.

Ahead, through the night, flew a white bird as though leading them, occasionally calling like a bronze cuckoo, so Lightning was happy and Socks felt as though the Silver Stallion were, indeed, leading them on.

Instead of going into the dense scrub on Paddy Rush's Bogong, they crossed the river higher up and edged around the more open slopes of the Brindle Bull, and just kept on travelling through the night, finally climbing up the back of Paddy Rush's Bogong where Socks knew there was a basin of snowgrass.

Socks felt sudden security. Surely no brumby hunters would come from the south as far as this!

They still had to find a hiding place. He could see some rocks up the back of Paddy Rush's Bogong. A place in which it would be possible to hide his family might be up there.

Socks went searching, but not before he had a good roll in the snowgrass basin, and as he rolled, he dreamt of finding something that was secret and deeply loved, that had a whole history of love, so that it would be happiness to be there. Somewhere where there would never be any brumby hunters, or mad dingoes. In his mind he floated there, in the whirling white spiral of snow. That silver horse had a hidden place. If he, Socks, ever found it, would he and his family be really welcome? Lightning, and dear Miss Dingo, and her two pups. Socks got up and shook himself. There was Lightning, Miss Dingo, and her pups — all so beautiful. He wished he could gather them together in their hollow candlebark by the Ingegoodbee.

But there was the white bird, leading them on.

The hill that rose from one half-circle surrounding the snowgrass basin had been in the path of a windstorm for there was a tangle of fallen snow gums and branches all over the top of it. The white hawk seemed to be hovering over it. Socks decided to go and investigate, so he cantered across and trotted up to the first barrier of broken trees and limbs. It was possible to jump and thread his way through, and then a track appeared to lead out to the other side of Paddy Rush's Bogong — a well-used brumby track — but it did not carry on through; there had been no evidence of it on the other side of the snowgrass basin. Socks was puzzled — somewhere the track must go round.

The white hawk flew to one side, and Socks followed. There was a track that went round the hollow. He could see Lightning and the dingo family through the trees, and he suddenly wanted to join them more than to go on. He forgot the white hawk and raced out to join his family.

But the white hawk hung in the sky above and when the family were all together, it flew a couple of circles and then headed south.

Socks and the family followed. It was beginning to get dark and they seemed to go for a long time through fairly open forest. Quite suddenly it was dark, and they were on the brink of a drop into the darkness. There was the white hawk hanging in the night, over a deep, dark drop.

How should they get down if that was where the white hawk was leading them?

The faintest track led along the edge of the drop; Lightning found that faint track and led on. Far below they heard a neigh.

Where were they going? To what were they coming?

On they went, Socks walking behind Lightning; Lightning sniffing out the track. There were no other sounds. Dog's feet and three dingoes' pads made no noise. Socks was trying to be silent.

He had begun to have a strong feeling that that brink they had come to, and



where the white hawk hovered in space over darkness, *might* be the fabled Secret Valley of Thowra's.

Now, he thought they might be travelling along the edge of Storm's Hidden Valley. Where did Son of Storm live?

Socks went on and on with his family and all his dreams and questions. Every few steps he put his head down to Lightning's, and each time checked up on those lovely little dingoes. All was well — they were all coming along through the night.

Then suddenly Lightning stopped in his tracks. Socks stopped still beside him. Something — *someone* — was on the track ahead.

In the darkness Lightning saw far more clearly than Socks did, and his hackles were up, but Socks could make out the dark bulk of a horse. He knew absolutely that it was Son of Storm, whom he had seen once travelling with the blue roan mare and the blue roan dwarf foal, towards the high country.

Son of Storm greeted the family ceremoniously and kindly, leading them down an easy way into his valley. It would surely be safe to stay here for a while, before making downwards to the Ingegoodbee and that hollow tree which really was 'home' to the whole family.

A stream ran down the Hidden Valley, and there were sandy caves. Son of Storm took them into one cave, and seemed delighted when the tired dog lay down and curled up to sleep with the dingo family.

Socks lay down, there, beside Lightning and his dingo family, and soon all was quiet.

## Seven

Son of Storm knew full well that Socks was a peaceful character, even though with a reputation for ferocity. He also knew that the whole family came from the Ingegoodbee.

Son of Storm showed them around his Hidden Valley and then led them to a track going south — a faint brumby track — which they followed with joy, after first farewelling Son of Storm very gratefully.

There they were on the route to home. Before evening they came to those pools that are the Ingegoodbee's head, and they splashed in there with joy and gratitude for that water, *their* water. The ducks rising off the pools did not fly far away. It was their water, too.

The family hurried on then till they reached the wide valley and the candlebarks. They galloped, all of them — dingoes, Lightning, and Socks — all going home.

Socks stood by the entrance to the hollow tree and each pup raced in, then dear Lightning put his paw up to Socks' nose and seemed to lead him in. It was *their* cave, where Miss Dingo had had the pups, and now she would give Lightning another part-dingo son. Her own little female pup would have an almost entirely dingo pup, but with its mother's gentle nature, and no sign of the mad, bad father.

Socks found his increased family slightly embarrassing, but he and Lightning went off hunting together, and all that mattered to both of them was that they could be together.

Socks had definitely taken the place of the old bushman who was once Lightning's master, and whose bones were now bleached above Cascade Creek. And Lightning happily regarded the hollow tree trunk as home. Sometimes Lightning and Socks took Miss Dingo to their old cave near the Cascades, but mostly they stayed in their beloved Ingegoodbee Valley and the hollow candlebark tree.

They knew, now, where Thowra's Secret Valley was, and also knew that they would *all* be welcome at Son of Storm's Hidden Valley. Sometime they would all go there, but mainly the dingo family felt most at home in the hollow tree on the Ingegoodbee.

A day did come when Socks decided to visit Son of Storm, and he gathered

the increased family together and set forth back along the faint brumby track.

They stopped that night at the Ingegoodbee pools, and Miss Dingo successfully caught a black fish — she slipped a paw beneath it and had it.

The pups all splashed in and out of the water and were quite happy to spend the night there. There were a lot of taffy-coloured brumbies about, but they were not inclined to be bossy. They told tales of Dancing Brumby and of his beautiful rainbow-tinted mate, lovelier than a snowflake. In fact, the bush seemed to be full of tales and the most persistent tale of all was the legend of the silver ghost, the white hawk, the spiralling willy-willy of snow.

Socks grew very restless and Lightning understood because he, too, had felt that there were spirits abroad in that Ramshead area — had felt that the white hawk was leading them *somewhere* — so Lightning understood in his heart that Socks must go seeking; also, perhaps, that he might never find. Surely if any dog ever sent thought waves to his master, Lightning did, and they curled up to sleep together by the head of the Ingegoodbee, each one knowing it would be an early start in the morning.

So in the strange shadowy bush of pre-dawn, the whole family set off. The dingoes, too, knew where they were going, and everyone was happy and dancing along. Miss Dingo saw a fox but not one of them caught it. Maybe Lightning got closest, and was thus very proud of himself.

A beam of sunlight came through the snowgrass near the head of Cascade Spur. Suddenly, lo and behold, there was the white hawk flying across the Cascade Valley, and a new excitement flowed through Socks and Lightning and on through the dingo family. Would it fly ahead, leading them? It certainly kept ahead.

The alpine ash were just starting to flower and their blossoms scented the air; the tea tree lining the creeks were flowering, too. Lightning was disappointed that there were no men with a herd of brumbies which he could cause to stampede. Socks was rather relieved, but they both kept their eyes open for anything strange.

In fact, it was a day they would remember, because intense heat began to promise a thunderstorm, so Lightning's hair was bristling on the back of his neck, and the birds all seemed to be disturbed — except the white hawk who just kept serenely on, often hovering ahead of Socks. Then two nankeen kestrels came flying swiftly and seemed to be going to claim this part of the mountains, and hunt the white hawk.

Socks was amazed to see it just fly on, taking no notice. When the kestrels went off, up the Cascade Valley, the white hawk came back to the family, hovered over them, and then seemed to lead them on in the general direction of

what was Son of Storm's Hidden Valley, or the general direction of Thowra's Secret Valley. The lack of interest showed by the white hawk bored the kestrels, and they departed, but the white hawk seemed almost to cut a swathe through a huge flight of black cockatoos which had come screaming out of the north.

Socks and Lightning were disturbed, but the dingoes did not take any notice. Socks was sure that there was bad weather coming. The white hawk flew a little faster and the family all went faster, too.

Bad weather would not bring snow at this time of year. Late summer was not the time for snow, so no moving spiral of white would suddenly envelope that white hawk, but whatever was coming was worrying, and the thought of those good, dry sandy caves of Son of Storm's kept sliding into Socks' head, yet he still felt certain that the white hawk might be going to show them *Thowra's Valley*.

The rain was starting to fall. Another small flight of black cockatoos skirted around the track of the white hawk.

Then the hawk dropped lower, and they were at the entrance to the Hidden Valley — once Storm's, and inherited by Son of Storm — and there was Son of Storm himself, welcoming the whole family. But the white hawk was flying on up the valley and Son of Storm, after greeting them, was urging them on and following the white hawk himself.

Socks gave Lightning's ear a little tug so that he followed, and soon they were on the faintest of slippery tracks up a hillside, out of the Hidden Valley. The white hawk was leading them onwards, up what seemed an impossible task. To turn back was not possible for Socks, perhaps possible for a dog or a dingo ...

Socks went on, the faithful Lightning at his heels, and the dingo family making light of the steep, slippery way.

There, in front of Socks and Lightning, was a beautiful valley, and the white hawk hovered over a silver horse.

They would know the way to a safe hiding place for the rest of their lives, but the hollow candlebark, birthplace of Miss Dingo's pups, at the Ingegoodbee Valley, would always be home.

Lightning put a paw up to Socks and the white hawk and silver horse led them to a sandy cave and the grassy bank of a stream. There were four freshly caught rabbits there for Lightning and the dingoes. Socks and Lightning and the dingo family were made marvellously welcome by that legendary silver horse. Lightning curled up beside Socks that night and all the family were happy.

Much later in the evening the rain stopped and the moon came out through clouds. Thowra and his favourite mare came and stood at the entrance to the cave and looked at the sleeping family.

Lightning and Socks both woke and saw them, outlined in moonlight.

## Eight

Home was home! That hollow tree on the Ingegoodbee might have been more loved now by the dingoes than by Socks, but Miss Dingo was getting a bit restless because more pups were going to be born. She would even leave Lightning and Socks and her older pups in order to get home, but in the end they all went; they all went back to the Ingegoodbee.

Soon they reached their hollow tree, inspected it and found everything in order. No possums, no rats, no ridiculous gang-gangs; Miss Dingo hunted them all away.

It did not need a strange whimpering coming from the hollow tree to make Socks realise that another pup or pups had been born and that his family had been increased by one, two or three, or even more. He dared not risk a savage nip on the nose from Miss Dingo to find out. However much she loved him, he knew that no one, not even Lightning, should go and look at the new pups. Later, when they were fat roly-polies, everyone would play with them.

So Socks lay down to sleep near the hollow tree, listening to the music of the Ingegoodbee River, and presently Lightning and the now-older pups lay down beside him. Miss Dingo came out once in the night to get a drink; she walked over and licked Lightning on the nose, and gave a quick lick to Socks. For Socks was their protector and giver of love.

He also knew that he had to urge Lightning on to being the producer of food. He had seen a few rabbits!

For a while the dingoes and the dog were kept busy catching rabbits and rats, and even fish, to feed Miss Dingo.

One hot day in late summer, Miss Dingo ventured out to see the others in the family, and to get a drink, and Socks was amazed to see a fat, short-legged pup follow her down to the river for a drink.

Socks watched in surprise and saw the pup step into a swirling eddy of current. Socks felt a shock of alarm go through him, just as the pup fell into a deeper hole and was whisked away by the river.

He heard Miss Dingo give a whimper of fear and misery, but he was already up on his feet and springing downstream from the struggling pup.

The water was not deep for Socks' long legs and he got in below the gulping,

crying pup, grabbed him by the scruff of the neck and lifted him up out of the water.

Then he turned around in the eddying current and scrambled over to where Miss Dingo was whimpering on the bank, handing her the soaking pup.

He was rather proud of himself. He had seen Miss Dingo carrying her pups by the scruff of their necks. He could do it just the same.

Miss Dingo rolled her pup in the dry grass and then licked him dry. Then she came over to Socks and licked him on the face.

When the young pup saw the other young ones swimming, he kept well away and retreated to the hollow tree.

The pools at the head of the Ingegoodbee were great places to swim, and they went there on their way to the Cascades a little later, then they went on towards Packsaddle Gap. The fat pup was tiring so Miss Dingo went on ahead till she found a soft place to rest.

Socks kept sniffing the air rather uneasily, and then stopped. In the end he decided to go on — mostly because Miss Dingo had gone ahead anyway, and he felt stupid if he changed his mind now.

Sometimes, however, the faint whiff of smoke on the air grew stronger.

That cave above the Cascades had always been a safe haven, though, and it surely would be now. It was evening before they got near and the smell of smoke was stronger — more frightening.

Voices sounded from the stockmen's hut. Socks hurried his family out of range as he heard one man saying, 'Old Lightning.'

Though they were not really close to the slab and shingle hut, the men's voices drifted through the dark. Socks and Lightning trotted on, away from the Cascades Creek, and up through the tea tree and bitter pea scrub towards that swamp below the cave where they had lived, undisturbed, for quite some time. Words, which they did not understand, but were said in a menacing tone, followed them.

'Goin' to that cave, I'll bet. We can smoke the buggers out of that.'

Another voice saying, 'You can have old Lightnin'. I'll take the youngest dingo pup.'

Socks could hear the menacing voice and was afraid. Lightning knew it was the same man he had escaped from before, the man who had ridden close by the cave.

Between them, Socks and Lightning escorted the young dingo family as fast as possible towards the cave.

The smell of smoke was a little stronger.

Presently they heard horses being caught and saddled.

A voice said: 'We'll catch them — they'll be smoked out of their cave.'

The wind was becoming stronger. Then a drink-slurred voice said: 'It'll all burn. You get out on the swamp and catch 'em as they run. I'll flick a match into the bush above the cave.'

Neither Socks nor Lightning understood the words, but they did hear a horse going up the ridge around their good cave. Then they were in the cave feeling safe — invisible, too — but the sound of horses coming towards them worried Lightning and Socks. Worse still was the sound of one horseman sneaking up behind them on the ridge.

Even the swamp was not as wet as usual, and the bush was drier than Socks had ever seen it.

Suddenly the smell of smoke grew stronger and there was the horrifying crackle of burning scrub, and then the roar of fire.

Neither Socks nor any of the Miss Dingo family had experienced a bushfire — they were too young — but Lightning had, and he knew they must make for water.

He rushed to the mouth of the cave just as a billow of smoke came over it from the burning scrub behind, and turned him back.

Socks was right beside him and heard, over the roar of the fire, men's voices coming from the swamp below.

Perhaps escape was cut off. A change of wind cleared away the smoke for a moment. Two men on horseback were below in the green grass that had been the swamp. Socks looked back into the cave. Little Miss had gathered her pups into the farthest corner. They would be safe for a while. The smoke thickened.

He and Lightning should try to drive the horsemen away. They had done it before and they could do it again — and look like ghosts in the smoke!

They waited a second while the smoke strengthened, then Socks gave Lightning a quick tug on one ear and they moved quickly and quietly towards the swamp, Lightning's paw sounding on the hard ground, and Socks squelching as they got into the wetter area.

Socks realised that they could not be seen through the smoke, because even Lightning seemed invisible. Then he nearly ran into an invisible man on horseback. First the horse's head loomed in the dense smoke, then the man's face and a bridle ring and buckle. Nothing was real, perhaps he did not see anything. Then the smoke blew around even thicker. Lightning bit an almost unseen horse's head. The horse lashed out and took off.

'There are ghosts about,' a man's voice said.

'Nonsense. Don't be a bloody fool. Smoke's hidin' everything.'

Then there was a yell as the bolting horse went under a tree.



‘What’s wrong with you? Cripes!’ the second man exclaimed, as his horse swung around into the creek and the smoke partially cleared, and for a moment he got a glimpse of Socks.

‘You’re right, mate! There bloody well *are* ghosts!’ and, as Socks aimed a vicious bite at his horse’s withers, ‘We’d better aim for the Cascades hut between the creeks while we can get there unburnt.’

But the other horse had bolted, Lightning at its heels.

The fire was getting fiercer. Socks made his way back to the cave, followed by Lightning. Both were hurrying, wondering how Miss Dingo was. Lightning seemed like a ghost beside Socks, quite insubstantial.

So another legend of the Cascades was born — ghost horse, ghost dog, who appeared and vanished, partially apparent and then gone ...

The story grew and grew because Socks, remembering how he had saved the pup from the current, took her by the scruff of her neck and, leading Miss Dingo, headed for the deep hole carrying the pup.

Socks knew that there was a reasonably deep hole — and cold — before the creek cut through the snow gums and headed for the big waterfall. He and Lightning and Miss Dingo, and her other pups, had to get there before the fire.

Miss Dingo and Lightning kept talking to the terrified pups.

The smoke blew in thick billows and breathing became very difficult. Socks even became afraid of losing sight of Miss Dingo and the pups. Lightning kept them herded together, but the smoke clouds became thicker than ever, and the noise of fire and wind was terrifying.

The two stockmen had already reached the deep pool, but Socks did not see them, and to them the new arrivals in the dense smoke were invisible, too. One stockman called out suddenly: ‘I tell ya, there *are* ghosts. I just seen a horse’s head, all transparent like, and it had a dingo pup by the scruff of the neck.’

‘Garn,’ said the other man. ‘You are bloody seeing things.’ Then suddenly he yelled, ‘Gor blimey, you’re not! I seen a horse’s head and its eye!’

‘But can’t you see it carrying the pup, too?’

‘Yes, I seen a dog — you aren’t a liar after all.’

‘I’m no liar! I can’t see him now for smoke, but I *did* see him, and I tell you what! It’s that mad black brumby.’

‘Okay. I’ll believe you, but I still think you may have been right the first time, about it being a ghost. I don’t like it. This Cascades is a queer bloody place.’

‘Queer bloody place, all right. I seen the silver ghost myself once.’

‘To hell with ghosts. You never had the guts to say you seen the Silver Brumby before ... Look! Look! There’s old Lightnin’, playin’ with dingoes. Go

on now! Talk about bloody ghosts!’

‘Sooner we can get out of here the better.’

‘Best stay, if we don’t want our hides burnt off.’

The first man was silent for a while, then he gave a yell as the smoke blew up in a spiral.

‘Look, look, there they are again,’ and there just for a second was the black head of a horse picking up a pup by its scruff. Then they were gone.

‘Ghosts, all right.’ The second man had tightened his grip on the reins. ‘It’s no wonder the herd of brumbies and the stockhorses bolted down the Leatherbarrel track. Let’s make for the hut *now*.’

‘Okay, there’s a wind change. We could do it safely now and leave the ghosts behind.’

There was the hint of laughter in the second man’s voice.

‘You don’t reck’n they are ghosts? You’re just laughing at me.’ His voice had sobered up a little, and he pulled his horse out of the water and set off through the smoke in the direction of the hut. ‘A creek on either side,’ he called. ‘We can escape if the fire comes.’

Socks saw them making off, like spectres. The water where he and the dogs were was good, although it had been a struggle to get them all there through the smoke and the heat.

The pup was splashing about with Miss Dingo and Socks did not want to move yet, but suddenly the wind swung due north and another fire sprang up where a spark had lit the bush. With the wind veering in all directions, nowhere seemed very safe.

Socks, inexperienced in fire, looked around him, worried. It was a long way to the hollow tree by the Ingegoodbee. A long way, even to the pools. Somehow they had to go. The tall trees on the way could be ablaze — but they weren’t.

Socks led his little family over the top of the Cascade Spur and down through swirling, masking scrub, but no flames. Lightning kept the dingoes together, and Socks carried the youngest pup.

At the first creek they came to, under arched tea tree, they rested and drank. The dingoes soaked their coats, and Socks let his aching teeth relax. As they stood in the icy water, the pup played around his legs, and Miss Dingo lay beside him. Lightning lay beside him, too, determined to be as close to Socks as possible. Lightning was uneasy, and glad when they moved on. Thunderclouds were building up, so everything was making Lightning uneasy.

There were a couple more creeks to cross before they got into an open valley that led up to the divide above the pools of the Ingegoodbee. They were getting closer to home, but smoke was coming from near the Ingegoodbee pools.

Miss Dingo kept sniffing the air, getting more and more upset. Once, when Socks put her pup down, she sat beside it and howled. Lightning carried it for a little way, but could not take it far, so he put it down in front of Socks and looked at his old friend with pleading eyes.

Socks rubbed his head on the dear old dog and picked up the pup. Not much farther to go to the divide above the pools, but fire was licking up through the scrub. Socks tightened his grip on the pup and charged through the crackling scrub and the flames. Miss Dingo and Lightning were beside him, and the older pups close behind.

There were the pools and green grass below. Socks burst into a gallop through the little patches of fire and plunged into the water, dunking the pup, splashing Lightning and Miss Dingo.

The other dingo pups hurled themselves into the pools, and Miss Dingo rushed to each one, licking it. Socks felt sudden pride and relief as he saw them all.

They stayed in the Ingegoodbee Pools for a long time, watching the distant hills lighting up on the horizon. Then Socks slowly began to make his way down the river to find their hollow tree. His family followed. It was quite a long way to go, but he took no shortcuts, feeling that they were safest in water. At any moment the bush near the river might burst into flames. Little spot fires started and went out, but if a wind got up again, the spot fires would join together and become a vicious blaze to singe coats and blister dingoes' paws.

So Socks kept walking in the water. At last he could see the shape of the hollow tree silhouetted against the red bushfire sky. He climbed up the bank. Miss Dingo raced ahead and looked into the hollow and came back wagging her tail. Socks followed her in and put the pup down proudly at her feet.

Miss Dingo stood up and licked his nose, and then Lightning was there too, licking him and petting his face. The other pups came in, limping with sore feet but glad to be home. A clap of distant thunder sounded, and lightning lit the distant sky. They were not far from the river if any fires were started here. Socks felt safe enough to sleep lightly — also he felt confident that Lightning would wake if anything went wrong.

So they curled up together half-sleeping, half-waking, and around them the fires in the hills began to die down as rain fell.

## Nine

Legends build up in the mountains. The fires hunted the stockmen out of the ranges, and the fires fuelled the stories. Socks and Lightning had already been a legend before those fires, but now they were the ghosts that haunted the Cascades: this black brumby with four white socks carrying a dingo pup to the safety of water by the scruff of its neck.

The summer visitors at Thredbo heard the tales, and at Perisher, the red stallion who led lost skiers back through a blizzard became the kind black horse with four white socks, with his family of dingoes and the faithful kelpie.

But Socks never went near Thredbo or Perisher. He *did* cross the Crackenback higher up when the fires had all died away, and he led the family on through the bush till they reached Son of Storm's secret valley. They crept through the horizontal grevillea that hid the entrance. There, beyond the grevillea, was Son of Storm, as though he were expecting them, waiting with a very friendly greeting.

He seemed to know that they intended to go on through to Thowra's Secret Valley and just went on with them, as though it were a matter of course, but left them at the start of the steep, rocky track around the cliff.

Lightning led the way — surefooted, and with claws that clung to the slippery track. There, too, was Thowra, waiting for them, expecting them.

Lightning pressed against Socks' foreleg and gave a bark of joy.

They *had* been expected, for there were four freshly-caught rabbits waiting in their cave. The hollow candlebark on the Ingegoodbee was home indeed, but here was also a safe home, and a loving welcome, as though they belonged to a larger family; the mountain streams and the mountain winds were all singing of the Silver Brumby becoming part of a snowfall, a whirling, circling whirlwind, and tales of a black brumby with white socks saving a dingo pup from drowning and then from fire. No one had ever heard such a thing. Lots of people in Jindabyne did not believe it.

Socks, standing close to Lightning as he ate some rabbit, could feel an electric current through his hair, and knew that there must be a storm coming. He saw Thowra look up at the sky once or twice, and in fact there were the first few clouds building up in the north, but there was no rain, no thunder, no lightning for several hours.

The only other sign of an electric storm coming was that, in spite of a good meal of rabbit, Lightning did not settle down to sleep, but kept getting up and disturbing them all.

Then the rain started, and sheet lightning lit the sky.

Socks got hold of Lightning's ear and pulled him down to sleep. After a few claps of thunder that echoed round and round the cave, the family curled up and slowly slept.

Socks woke hours later as the whole valley was lit up and there, as though the scene were being re-enacted, stood Thowra and Boon Boon, silhouetted at the mouth of the cave. Both Thowra and Boon Boon bowed their heads to Socks and he slept then, in safety, with Lightning and Miss Dingo and her pups.

The rain kept on pouring down and thunder kept on rumbling and crashing. Lightning woke, disturbed, and both Thowra and Son of Storm came to the cave to check on the family, Son of Storm having made a rather perilous journey round the cliff in the streaming rain.

It was dawn when he arrived, and there was still no let up in the weather, except that the lightning had ceased. There *was* a rumour murmuring through the bush that there were bands of brumby hunters coming, in spite of, or because of, the rough weather. Baringa had come north-west, from *his* secret valley, with the news of various groups of riders coming over from Benambra. Some of them he had recognised from times before. One in particular was a noted brumby catcher, a man who boasted he would catch his thousandth brumby this summer. He had a dog who was a half-brother to Lightning — not that anyone but he knew this. The brumby catcher had heard the stories of the kelpie dog with a touch of blue heeler, and hoped *his* dog might track him.

That man rode on his own and was feared by any brumbies who had seen him in action. It was that man, on his own, of whom the currawongs were calling with their high, wild calls that were usually not to be heard during such a storm.

Son of Storm heard them and took heed, and came round the cliff to tell Thowra. Thowra had already heard from Benni, the kangaroo, and he warned Socks and Lightning to stay at the back of the cave. He himself, in the shape of a white hawk, went flying over the lone rider, frightening his horse, making him shy away from the cliff that bordered his Secret Valley.

Suddenly Socks and Lightning heard a bronze cuckoo calling, rather out of season, especially for them. A warning? Perhaps simply saying, 'stay here', as he had at their Ingegoodbye home, and at the cave above Cascades Creek.

The bronze cuckoo call always disturbed Lightning. It seemed as if his old master were whistling to him, but he knew, now, that his old master would never call again, and somehow Socks had taken his place. Socks did not whistle; he

just tugged him by the ear. Socks was the beloved protector — the one who carried a puppy away from fire. Socks was his master now.

Both Socks and Lightning were wondering if this general feeling of unrest in the mountain forest and streams was explained by the presence of the lone hunter.

Far away, a dog barked. Socks listened, and looked at Lightning, and Lightning was really there, but that *had* sounded like his bark. Further away, it sounded again, and suddenly the white hawk flew over and then vanished. Socks and Lightning both got up ready to go — they must go and find the dog with a bark like Lightning. Socks knew there was no way out of Thowra's Secret Valley except through Son of Storm's hidden valley, so that was the way they went.

Suddenly the white hawk appeared again and then was gone.

They could not know that Thowra, in his guise of a white hawk, was scaring the wits out of the thousandth brumby man's horse, and that for the first time ever that extremely good horseman was going to find his horse uncontrollable, terrified by white wings flapping across his eyes.

So Socks and Lightning arrived in time to see the man they knew as a wonderful horseman fighting to stop his bolting horse, but they did not see the dog, nor would Lightning have recognised a half-brother. To Lightning, a bolting horse just needed one thing — a jolly good nip to encourage it, and a snarling nip at that.

He did not reckon on the other dog, who suddenly rushed out of the prosanthera scrub and took to Lightning, so there was a growling, snarling mass of dog making the horse even more frightened, as did the man's voice cursing the dog.

Then Socks charged in to kick and bite and strike, so the melee was fearsome. The noise was also fearsome, and *then* when the flapping wings of the white hawk vanished and a ghostly silver stallion appeared instead, the man gave a yell as he got his lasso ready.

'I'll have you, you bugger!' but somehow Thowra vanished and was not going to be the thousandth! The man called his dog off, and himself vanished into a beating rainstorm, and some sheet lightning.

## Ten

The stories related in the Jindabyne pub had become so many times told and retold (losing nothing in the telling), that both walkers and horsemen came into the mountains in greater numbers. They were all hoping to see for themselves the ghost of the Silver Brumby, or the black brumby with four white socks. No one really knew whether the silver horse or the black one was a ghost or not, the stories varied so much.

Stories of the silver ghost had been about for years; stories of his sons and grandsons had been told round campfires ever since the men who had chased the Silver Brumby swore that he jumped to his death. Now the men who were at the Cascades hut during the bushfire swore that they had seen this other ghost — the black brumby with four white socks carrying the dingo pup in his teeth, a ghost for sure. There one minute and vanished the next.

Lightning was very interested, very curious, about the dog whom he did not realise was so like himself, and whose bark was so similar.

Thowra was curious, too, though in fact he knew the dog's owner — the cleverest of brumby catchers — by sight, and by his horse's hoof marks. In fact, Thowra was anxious that the 'thousandth-brumby hunter' man should not know where his secret valley was. *He* realised that the thousandth-brumby hunter, lone worker as he was, did have a dog related to Lightning.

It was Socks who thought that his beloved Lightning might be a danger to Thowra, and Socks who led his family back to the Ingegoodbee.

On the way south they came on tracks that showed them the way in which the men from Gippsland came into the Snowy Mountains.

And there, on the track, riding away from them, was the thousandth-brumby hunter.

Socks bent down quickly, tugged Lightning by his ear, and melted backwards into the trees and bushes, followed silently by Miss Dingo and her pups. If the brumby catcher's dog was with him, he must get neither scent nor sound of them.

There was no bark. Socks and his party had not been seen nor smelt. They were behind that one man and his dog, and what wind there was blew from the south, bringing scent and sound back to Socks — and to Lightning.

Lightning barked.

Socks could peer through the bush, and he saw the man rein in his horse, turn in the saddle and stare around, but mainly towards where Socks and the family were hidden.

They stayed very quiet, but soon staying so still was more than Lightning could bear, and, just when the man's horse started to canter, he gave a low 'keep away' growl.

The man on ahead looked back and swung his horse around, his right hand grasping at the coils of his lasso. As he caught sight of Socks and his family, he pushed his horse into a gallop.

Socks melted backwards into the bush, but Lightning — recognising the man's horse as the one whom the white hawk's flapping wings had scared — knew he was the sort of horse who could be frightened.

Lightning would do his best to frighten the wits out of him. He raced in to nip its heels, then danced in front of him, nipped and danced, and all the time barked and growled.

Socks then raced in, teeth bared and giving great stallion screams. Panic was setting in. Just then the dingoes joined in, howling weirdly.

Galloping over one of the clear Beloka hills came another man to join in the scrum. Miss Dingo began to howl. The man uncoiled his lasso, just as the dingo pup raced towards the man's horse.

'We'll have a pup if no other, and the family might come back for him,' the man yelled as he cast his lasso.

It flew through the air and over the dingo's head.

Socks heard him cry and then seem to choke as the rope tightened round his throat. Sudden fury seized Socks as he heard Miss Dingo howling as she had howled for his help once before, when the pup was drowning, but he was already galloping. The man's voice rang out, 'Don't want to throttle him,' and he sprang off his horse to loosen the lasso.

Another yell! The pup, no longer choking, had bitten the man's hand. There was another man there, throwing his shirt over the dingo's head.

Then Socks was there, striking and biting between open-mouthed screams.

The man was back on his horse. 'I'll take the dingo,' he yelled. 'You try and catch the brumby.'

The air was full of dingo howls and Socks' stallion screams. Miss Dingo howled as the pup sat and refused to move and then was dragged along. Socks raced up to the second man and leapt at him, striking and biting. Lightning was rolling the other dog down the grassy hill, then left him and tackled the heels of the horse whose rider was dragging the pup.

The horse did not like it, and was dancing and bucking, trying to bolt. It



didn't like the dingo pup, either.

The struggle went on and on. Socks was discovering that he loved dingo pup dearly.

Lightning got more and more desperate. What was worse, his coat was tingling as thunderclouds gathered over the Beloka valley. He looked up once and saw a great rock peak with a shaft of lightning above it. At that moment the horse bolted in earnest, and the man vanished into the grassy hills.

The dingo pup with the rope around its neck was left behind.

Then, *crack!*, the lightning struck MacFarlane's Lookout. A great wedge of rock peeled off it, lightning ran jagged from it, and fire ran along the grass like a whip cracking — or a snake!

Socks saw the lightning starting. There was a tremendous *crash!* and another lightning strike in a great, jagged flame right onto MacFarlane's Lookout. Socks stopped still with horror and then hastened to where the pup, with the lasso still tight round his neck, sat whimpering breathlessly on the faint track.

Socks was there in a moment, trying to loosen the rope with his teeth, Then Miss Dingo arrived, too, and started chewing at the lasso, both of them loosening it. It was undone just as the third lightning strike split the sky and the rocky lookout and a great piece of rock peeled off.

Don't try and capture any more of us, Socks thought, and he picked up the exhausted dingo pup, carrying him over the gently rolling, grassy hills till they reached some scrubby cover. Lightning was there beside them, and Miss Dingo.

The only thing in Socks' mind was to get back to the Ingegoodbee, however far it was to go. It was a long way from Beloka, home of the brumby hunters. Even the man who had nearly caught one thousand brumbies was not coming back for a while.

Socks looked back once before he went into the trees. He saw the quiet rolling hills and MacFarlane's Lookout, and put the pup down gently. Lightning stood beside him and softly licked the pup, then put up a paw and touched Socks' nose.

When the pup recovered they went on into the night.

Socks and Lightning and the family travelled through the night, resting in thick scrub by a little creek when the moon came up.

There were mauve euphrasia flowering by the quietly singing water. The pup slept badly and Miss Dingo comforted him when bad dreams woke him, howling with fear. Lightning curled up between Miss Dingo and Socks — the two he loved most in his mountain world.

We must sleep now, Socks thought to himself. In his mind, he knew it would be a long day, the next journey.

The pup slept without bad dreams, at last, there by the Buonbar Creek, the song of the little creek bringing him relief from fear of that rope tightening round his neck and fear of thundering hooves. If he woke at all there were Socks' enfolding legs and his mother's tongue, as quick to lick as Lightning's.

Socks' sleep was not quite so peaceful as it might have been, because the face of the thousandth brumby hunter kept floating into his sleeping vision, and the picture of the stampeding mob below MacFarlane's Lookout, and his dreams would be disturbed by the thought that his presence in the Secret Valley could bring danger to Thowra and Boon Boon. Lightning's bark might call up the brumby hunter's dog, even give away the location of the Secret Valley, but he deeply wanted to get there. Anyway, they would not start till the next day.

As the stars faded in the night sky, Socks woke his family and took them to the creek to drink. Then they started the long trek round the base of the Pilot across the Indi River to the Ingegoodbee.

A track went through Buonbar, which they followed for a while, before Socks thought it better just to keep going in the direction which he knew *should* be right, and would be away from brumby hunters.

Pup got tired and asked for 'a lift'.

They just kept going on and on, Socks giving the pup a lift sometimes. Even Lightning fulfilled his parental duties and carried the pup, but it was Socks who seemed to be the pup-carrier mostly. Saving the pup from drowning and from the fire seemed to have made a strong bond with the fat roly-poly, and Miss Dingo was always happy when Socks was caring for him.

On and on they went till evening and luckily, Lightning found a big rock which would shelter them all, and they decided to spend part of the night there, because everyone was tired, but they did not rest for long. Socks was anxious about the brumby hunter finding Thowra's Secret Valley. He did not really know exactly what was worrying him, but something was, and he kept feeling that he should go and see Thowra and warn him.

It had been a summer and now an autumn of thunderstorms — a great deal of clamouring noise, so poor Lightning was constantly on edge, constantly being woken at night.

But one particular night, in between rumbles of thunder, he also heard whips cracking in the distance, and the sound of horses neighing. He got up, stretched himself, and nosed Socks to let him know that it was time to go and look into the commotion.

They were already quite a long way from home, because there had been disturbing movements in the bush, and strange messages in the mountain wind

and strange songs in the crystal-clear mountain streams. Whispering winds, and calls as though unusual birds were passing through the mountains. Altogether it was a queer season. Socks was bothered by it, but Lightning was sure something very odd was going to happen.

Brumbies seemed to be on the move, too, and Socks thought there must be men in from the south hunting them, but this was the first time he — or Lightning — had heard the sound of whips quite close.

On he and Lightning went, Socks trying to be as silent as possible. For a while there was no sound ahead, then they heard a distant whip crack in the direction in which they were going.

A great rumble of thunder filled the air, and then sheet lightning blazed through the bush, and they saw one terrified brumby racing past them as though escaping from something, or someone.

Lightning crept closer to Socks.

They stood still together while the sheet lightning lasted. It lit up messmates and candlebarks, making every corner of the forest seem ghostly. At last the sheet lightning faded, then there was just darkened forest.

It should have become a normal bush night, but everything was on the move everywhere. Socks heard a phalanger flying above them, and saw it gliding from the top of a ribbon gum to the ground. Then he and Lightning seemed to be in a hollow through which a straight-sided creek flowed, and the trees became swamp gums, even more ghostly and dark.

Socks felt a shiver go down his backbone. He wished they had not come. They knew, now, that there was a big mob of brumbies ahead of them, and quite a few shod horses. This little hollow clearing must be Buonbar, before they reached the clearer country where the brumby hunters lived.

Suddenly the thunder started to rumble again and a few flashes of lightning lit the sky. Socks' poor friend Lightning was horrified. Socks stood over him as he cowered under a swamp gum.

Then suddenly they heard the whips again cracking ahead. The brumby mob must have broken there in the Buonbar hollow, and the stockmen were trying to gather them together to drive them along the track to Beloka.

Socks and Lightning stayed quietly hidden till they could hear that the mob was together and moving on.

An occasional sheet of lightning lit the bush, and showed the big mob of brumbies held together on the wings by mounted stockmen. Socks wondered if the time had come to try to cause a stampede, but suddenly it happened without their help.

An enormous crash of thunder reverberated all around the hills, and then the

lightning came in a great sheet. Against that wild sheet of lightning there stood that rock tower — rough and rugged — high above the surrounding Beloka hills. MacFarlane's Lookout, just there for a second, held forever in Socks' memory and in Lightning's memory. Then the brumbies began to stampede, sweeping along the stockhorses with them — just a mass of galloping horses.

Socks stood still, stunned by the vision of stampeding horses, only thinking of getting home, getting home before they were seen and recognised by any of the brumby hunters. (Indeed, he had not seen one man whom he recognised.)

There were horses breaking in every direction, and men with whips after them.

It was time to go; time to go while they still had sheltering trees around them.

Socks made a grab at Lightning, and together they turned home. Home was a long way away. And in Socks' mind was that weird vision, lit by sheet lightning, of the tall, rugged rock tower and a mad, broken mob of galloping brumbies scattered beneath it, and the few stockmen trying to round them up.

To Socks, it was like a nightmare. To Lightning it was a lingering vision of fear, and yet wild excitement as he almost dreamed of himself getting among those horses and driving them crazy. Some day maybe he would chase brumbies and stockhorses again. But he must stay with Socks.

Slowly Socks and the faithful old dog made their way back to the hollow candlebark on the Ingegoodbee River. Neither Socks nor Lightning were ever going to forget that misty scene of the stampeding horses lit by the sheet lightning that blazed around the rugged rock tower.

They crept into the hollow tree with Miss Dingo and her pups, but for both Socks and Lightning that picture still remained like an after-vision, or something that was still to happen; horses galloping madly in moonlight or barely visible in the dark of night, and the great rock tower high, high above the rolling Beloka hills.

Hundreds of brumbies stampeding, the handful of stockmen galloping after them and trying to round them up — and that great rock tower standing out against the sheet lightning. Somehow, Socks felt he had to know what had happened afterwards. There had not been any sounds through the bush of brumbies, in twos or threes, sneaking home.

In the end Socks and Lightning simply had to go out to look for any signs of brumbies, or of the brumby hunters from the south, and see if any were heading towards Thowra's Secret Valley.

So they went up to the Ingegoodbee Pools, then southward, one evening.

Sometimes they found signs of horses passing by — broken branches, hoof marks, torn shrubs — but it was a long time before they came on the mark of a shod horse, and it was heading south. In front of it was a hard-hoofed brumby's tracks.

Nose to this track, Socks puzzled over it. He knew he had seen it before at some time. He knew he would follow it and find out if the brumbies had been captured and taken down out of the mountains.

Lightning's coat was bristling as he smelt at the hoof marks.

It was the track of a single-shod horse — the brumby hunter who worked on his own.

Socks felt his own coat creeping. Perhaps it would be better to go home and not find out where those brumbies had gone ... but Lightning had his nose to the track. Socks felt that there *must* be something interesting ahead.

Presently the tracks of that shod horse seemed to go faster ... trotting ... at last cantering. Then it stopped, seemed to swing around and melt into the bush, into some thick bacon-and-egg scrub.

Socks waited. Lightning sniffed around, but it was obvious that the one shod horse had hidden in the dense scrub for quite a while; the ground was stamped around in a circle where he had stood, and finally a few tracks showed where he had moved on.

Lightning and Socks moved on too, but with more caution, Lightning sometimes walking on tiptoes.

It was when they reached the place where the shod horse had turned off to the west, and then back in the direction from which they had come, that Socks really felt anxious.

They saw no sign of anyone — other than hoof marks — and Socks was getting more and more apprehensive, and soon Lightning got nervous, too, but it was too late.

There, half-hidden in hop scrub, sat the lone brumby hunter on his horse.

He sat quite still for a moment, then urged that shod horse to spring forward, shouting:

'You'll do for the thousandth, you bugger!' and it seemed less than a second before he was going for Socks, seemed minutes only before he was chasing that black horse with the four white feet.

Socks swung away more quickly than Lightning thought possible, but Lightning himself was as quick as his name would suggest racing after the big shod horse. Then, as he saw the man's hand on the lasso, saw the move by his arm to get ready to throw it, he leapt at the shod horse's fetlock and *bit*.

The horse sprang upwards and forward — and the arm throwing the lasso

could not throw it true. It struck Socks on the side of the head and fell to the ground. Lightning jumped over it, and got in another bite on the horse's heels, as the brumby hunter gathered the lasso and gathered in his leaping horse.

Then Lightning went after Socks, gladly realising that the man was not following; glad, too, that Socks was now heading home to the hollow tree on the Ingegoodbee.

Then he heard the sad whistle of the bronze cuckoo — out of season — and they made a wide detour round the Ingegoodbee Pools, and kept right away from the river till, finally, they crossed it and made a beeline for their hollow tree.

Socks lay down thankfully. Fright had made him very tired. He knew that he had had a very narrow escape, and that Lightning's timely bite on the man's horse's fetlock had caused the lasso to fall short.

He nuzzled Lightning's ear by way of thanks. Lightning had saved him from capture. He was not going to be the thousandth brumby caught by that man.

## Eleven

Socks' feeling of unease grew over the two days that they spent in the beloved hollow tree, until one morning he woke very early, tugged Lightning on the ear and off they set. Miss Dingo raised her head and licked Lightning's nose.

Somehow she had known they would have to go, and for a day or so, the pup would be without his protector.

Socks was anxious.

He had heard the faraway bark of that dog, and he knew, somehow, that this brumby hunter really wanted Thowra (or his ghost) to be his thousandth brumby. So he headed straight across country to Son of Storm's Hidden Valley, for that was the only way into Thowra's Secret Valley.

Well before they got there, they heard that dog's bark again, and closer. They decided to veer a little in the direction of the bark and see, if possible, who was coming.

Lightning knew to be silent, as something seemed to be nearby, and then they could see the man and his dog going through the trees. His lasso was fastened to the saddle.

The air seemed very still and quiet. Socks and Lightning made no sound.

Presently they turned quietly towards Son of Storm's hiding place.

Once again they were expected. Son of Storm met them and was obviously anxious, and there were several white hawks high in the sky above the two hidden valleys.

Son of Storm took them over the cliff to Thowra's valley, but Thowra was not there, and his creek seemed to be murmuring strange things, telling of movements of birds of the air.

There again was the out-of-season call of the bronze cuckoo. It contained a message, Lightning knew, but he did not know what, beyond the fact that it was important to stay close to Socks.

Then, in the middle of the night, there was Son of Storm at the mouth of their cave and an owl calling.

Son of Storm nickered softly for them to follow, and off they set round the cliff again.

At last they were out in the bush and they could hear several owls calling. Son of Storm went in the direction of the owl calls and they simply went with

him. Lightning began to feel a bit jumpy. The owl calls were eerie, and when a bronze cuckoo called to the moon, even though it was not spring, he felt the presence of his old master very strongly.

Suddenly he felt he must drive that brumby-hunting man away and as the bronze cuckoo called to the moon, he shot ahead barking, and when he got close enough, snapping at the horse's heels, leaping at his hocks and growling fiercely. The horse took a big leap forward, but the rider kept him under control, cursing slightly.

Socks and Son of Storm both thought it time to join in the harassing, and the man's dog came in, too, biting indiscriminately.

Noise echoed round the bush. The birds were rather quieter and gathering close, and gradually a hush descended on the bush birds, as though the bush were waiting ... Even Lightning was quieter for a second and in that second a silver horse took shape in between the trees.

'I'll get you, you bugger,' shouted the man, kicking his horse's ribs. But the silver horse was somewhere else, and a white hawk's wings were beating in the man's face and blinding the horse. Then that silver horse was rearing and neighing, on ahead. The man swung round, out of the bush and towards the gleam of silver.

The gleam was gone.

Searching and cursing, the man rode hither and thither, and the owls gathered around him.

There was a creek nearby with a little waterfall flying in silver spray, and the spray was like a silver horse.

Owls must drink and they flew to the pool below the falls. The man followed them, or was driven by them. Drinking there, too, was the bronze cuckoo: green-bronze back and cream shirt-front, all striped with bronze.

The man tried to ride up the stream to find the silver horse. There were blackberries and wild raspberries to entangle his horse's legs. He could not get through, and cursed the silver horse whom he had sworn to catch.

Then the owls rose in a cloud around him again, soft wings brushing his face and he backed out into a mob of brumbies that were all set to chase him, egged on by Lightning and Socks.

In darkness that chase began and in darkness it ended, and the thousandth brumby caught by that hunter was never to be the Silver Brumby, never the Silver Brumby or his ghost; neither would it be Socks, and never again would that hunter lasso a dingo pup.

Socks and Lightning made their way back with Son of Storm, and then on from his valley to Miss Dingo and the pups in the hollow tree beside the



Ingegoodbee River.

They slept before the stars faded in the dawn sky and then hurried on, dreaming of Miss Dingo and the pups. Socks realised that as protector of the youngest pup, he had become very fond of it, and Miss Dingo really looked to him to save her youngest from any misadventure.

When they reached the Ingegoodbee Pools, Lightning plunged in with enormous joy. Socks stood there, up to his knees, enjoying the benediction of the Ingegoodbee water.

There were always quite a number of brumbies around the Ingegoodbee Pools, but as the dawn filtered through the trees there started up a clamour of distant neighs. Socks put up his head to listen. Maybe a strange horse might have followed them through the night, and now was disturbing the brumbies who lived around the area.

When Socks saw the strange horse and its rider, he realised neither horse nor man had ever been seen by him before, but it was obviously a man who was after brumbies and, in Socks' mind, far too close to their Ingegoodbee home for safety.

He gathered himself together and sprang out of the pool, and headed towards the horse and the man whom he could only make out like a flickering spectre moving between trees. He did not realise that he, himself, was partly hidden by messmate tree trunks, and that only his white socks gleamed through the dark forest.

Then he began to scream, and gallop for the stranger.

The noise and the thundering white socks were unbearable for the quite green young horse and, immediately out of control, he turned and galloped. Socks was in full pursuit, and then Lightning, too.

The young horse, unused to bolting through forest, was soon in trouble and his rider even more so.

There was the crashing of breaking branches, the thud of legs on timber, the stallion screams and Lightning's furious barks. Then as yells rang out from the young rider Socks and Lightning began to save their breath.

On and on they went, till at last the young man was swept off by an overhanging branch. Socks and Lightning stopped, but they heard the young man cursing as he walked after his horse.

'Never again, never again,' he yelled, as he stumbled on through the forest. Neither Socks nor Lightning understood the words, but the whole appearance of him said he had had enough.

They turned and headed for lower down the Ingegoodbee.

It was full daylight when they reached the hollow tree, but all the family

were close by and rather anxious. Miss Dingo gave them a tumultuous welcome and the pup would not leave Socks' side.

Miss Dingo, feeling sure they must come back, had caught some rabbits for Lightning and soon, even though it was bright daylight, they were all curled up together in their own hollow tree with the music of the Ingegodbie River singing them to sleep.

Lightning half-woke and put up a paw to Socks' nose, and the pup burrowed in close. Socks half-opened one eye and surveyed his family, and he heard the whistle of a bronze cuckoo in the tree above where he and his family slept. A bar of sunlight fell on the green-bronze back of the little bird, and on the bronze stripes of its creamy breast and the feathers that went down its legs, making striped trousers.

Socks touched Lightning's head with his nose. The dog that sat beside the dead master was *his* dog now.

## **Wild Echoes Ringing**

## One

Socks, the black brumby with the four white feet, was half-waking even though he was warm and comfortable in the hollow tree above the Ingegoodbee River. He kept thinking he heard a strange whisper in the sound of the river — a message? A warning? Something that the river was saying?

At last he got up and moved quietly to the tree opening. He walked to the stream, the faithful blue-black heeler, Lightning, a pace behind. He listened to the message that was in the river's song.

Socks could tell by the quizzical expression on Lightning's face and his half-cocked ears that Lightning was also hearing the song of the stream, and perhaps wondering, sadly, if it were any word from his old dead master.

Yet there was nothing clear in the whispered song, and something puzzling because it seemed to be about faraway streams and mountains, and yet about the thousandth brumby catcher, and about Thowra, the Silver Brumby. Socks listened and listened, and began to feel that he and Lightning should be near Thowra to warn him of danger. Lightning kept starting off in the direction of Thowra's Secret Valley, and then coming back, as though to say, 'Come on! Come on!'

It was clear that Lightning felt there was something amiss, too — some great danger — to Thowra.

Without Socks even having to pull Lightning's ear, they set off northwards in the dark — northwards to where the snow was probably falling, and where the wind that was already blowing down by the Ingegoodbee was surely howling with blizzard force.

Socks could only imagine the Ramshead country, and the snow gathering into a whirlwind — a whirlwind that circled round and round, hiding the snow-packed rocks then suddenly taking the shape of a silver horse.

There was something haunting about Thowra; Socks knew he must go to Son of Storm's Hidden Valley, just downstream from Thowra's and to where he could get to Thowra's Secret Valley, and make sure that they were all safe — Son of Storm, Thowra, and Thowra's favourite mare Boon Boon.

Lightning seemed to feel the same urgency to go and find Son of Storm, and to check on Thowra and Boon Boon. They simply kept going northwards into the blizzard.

Slowly the peppering pellets of snow became bigger pellets borne on the wind. Horse and dog, they bowed their heads to the biting cold and kept the snowflakes out of their eyes.

Socks felt a deeper dread claiming him, as the wind and snow gusted in his face. A robin redbreast, carried on the wind, fluttered helplessly past them.

The snow was gathering on the ground on the north side of bushes and grass tussocks. There was a feeling of dread — increasing with every blast.

Socks imagined he could hear the sound of the hoof-beats of the Brumby Hunter. What was the Brumby Hunter doing in the high country in winter, anyway? Such a foolhardy action could mean only one thing, the Brumby Hunter was having one last crack at catching his Thousandth Brumby, and what better horse than the legendary Silver Brumby? This time he would not go home without his ultimate prize. So would it only increase the danger to Thowra and Boon Boon if he and Lightning went towards the Hidden Valley? They might lead the Brumby Hunter towards Thowra's Secret Valley. They kept on going, and the higher they got, the more the snow fell and whirled around.

Suddenly Socks stopped, with one forefoot in mid-air. There in front of him — just for a moment — was a ghostly silver horse all misted around in wind-tossed snow. Lightning gave one bark and then was quiet.

The ghostly horse vanished away and Socks and Lightning lingered on, but Socks heard the sound of cantering hooves more plainly, and he and Lightning slackened their pace. They also heard the howl of the wind more loudly.

Socks rubbed his head on Lightning's. There was something rather weird about this storm, and it was comforting to rub against Lightning; Lightning was such a loyal and faithful friend — ever since Lightning had left his dead master's side and come with Socks — the two loners walking together.

They both listened for a few seconds to the sound of the advancing hooves, and then, without Socks's urging, they both backed into thick scrub together and waited to see what would happen.

The hoof-beats slowed down and then stopped.

Socks peered through the tea tree's small white blooms and saw something that made him gasp. There was the Brumby Hunter and suddenly, too, there was a twisting whirlwind wrapping around the Brumby Hunter's horse. Then just as suddenly, the whirlwind was gone, and the Brumby Hunter's horse was standing, trembling, as though it had seen a ghost — which indeed it may have.

Socks, himself, felt a cold touch creep down his spine, and he looked at Lightning and saw him shiver slightly, too. Yet he knew that they must go on and warn Thowra — if he did not already know — that the great Brumby Hunter was on the search again.

But how to warn Thowra without leading the Brumby Hunter right to him? It was best to do nothing at all for a while and see what happened.

Socks and Lightning stood absolutely still, feeling that even to breathe might give their position away. As they stood, they saw the Brumby Hunter press his horse onto the bit and move off.

They followed — slowly — until, all of a sudden, as though he had heard something, the Brumby Hunter veered a little to the east.

Socks and Lightning veered east, too, but cautiously, for the easterly direction led to the Secret Valley. Socks corrected the course a little, and kept a careful watch ahead and all around.

The Brumby Hunter kept trotting on slowly, as if uncertain whether he was on the right track.

Socks was uncertain, too, but he and Lightning had to keep the Brumby Hunter in sight.

Hours passed and Socks and Lightning were both feeling very uneasy. They had travelled so far so quickly— maybe some of Thowra's magic was indeed rubbing off on them? In fact, they must be getting nearly level with the Secret Valley, and what was the Brumby Hunter going to do?

The Brumby Hunter turned harder to the east.

Socks and Lightning were worried. Soon the Hunter would come to the edge of the cliff above Thowra's Secret Valley. There was no way into the valley except through Son of Storm's Hidden Valley.

They kept close, watching, yet nothing seemed to happen. Then, some low, dark clouds thickened around the wide-spaced candlebarks which fringed the cliff edge, the snow began to fall more thickly, coming down in great, tossed gusts, masking the Brumby Hunter, even masking the black horse with the four white socks, so that Lightning pressed closer to Socks' legs. This early winter fall of snow caused Lightning's skin to rise with fear of he knew not what.

Somehow he was sure there were spirits about that night. He was sure he heard his old master whistling, but as he started to bark his reply, Socks gently rubbed his head for silence and for watchfulness.

They watched the snow whirling round the Brumby Hunter as he reined in his horse and sat looking into the chasm which contained Thowra's Secret Valley. The snow masked both him and his horse, then cleared, came in swirling gusts and then cleared again.

While they watched just for one moment, the snow ceased and in that clear, grey second, there was Thowra cantering towards the two big candlebarks which were surely markers for him, and always had been.

Socks held his breath as he saw Thowra tighten the muscles in his quarters as

though he were going to jump.

The snow closed in again and suddenly whirled in a dancing cloud around the stallion, and even Lightning was not entirely certain that he was contained in that whirlwind, or willy-willy, of snow.

Socks knew, in his heart, that Thowra had jumped into the Secret Valley — maybe onto one platform and then another, as legend had it he had done once before when he escaped the men who were chasing him.

The great Brumby Hunter rode his trembling horse between the two candlebarks. Socks and Lightning walked a little closer to the edge, trying to see what had happened, though Socks was certain he knew that Thowra had jumped.

Apparently the Brumby Hunter could see no way down, and turned up the big cleft of the Secret Valley to try to find a way in. Socks and Lightning crept closer to the edge.

There, right on the edge, Lightning sniffed out the hoofmarks where Socks thought Thowra had jumped. His excited sniffing around alerted Socks, and Socks knew for certain that this was the place from which Thowra had taken off, and that the legend was true. He heard a sound rising up from below, and a picture formed in his mind of a silver horse jumping through space and landing on a platform, then taking off again through the flake-filled night.

As long as the Brumby Hunter thought Thowra had jumped to his death, there would be no more hunting and Thowra could live in peace — as long as Thowra could content himself with staying quiet and not trying to tease *any* brumby hunters, far less appear as a silver whirlwind, or a hawk.

The best thing to do, Socks and Lightning both thought, was to go down to Son of Storm's Hidden Valley and, from there, creep up the cliff to Thowra's secret place and make sure he was there — and alive.

## Two

Socks and Lightning stood there, well hidden in heath bushes by the cliff edge, watching the Brumby Hunter riding up and down the edge, waiting to see what would happen next. And all the time they waited, the snow floated down more and more thickly, covering up tracks that told of Thowra's strong jump through empty space; but sharp-cut indentations were there, even if masked by snow, that told of Thowra's leap — that told that the legend was true, and that Thowra knew of a way of jumping down the cliff.

And Socks knew in his heart that Thowra had floated, like the snowflakes, down, down and down, into the safety of the Secret Valley.

Lightning knew, too, though sometimes he wondered if it were just a cloud that he had seen — a cloud of snow?

But clouds did not jump, clouds did not hold the shadow of a fine horse's head, or of its fine legs. Lightning, too, felt convinced that Thowra was safely in the Secret Valley with Boon Boon.

Then suddenly through the snowflakes, there rose up, as though dancing, a white hawk. It danced through the floating, spiralling flakes, and brushed against the eyes of the Brumby Hunter's horse, driving it away from the cliff's edge, and the white hawk called once, its voice saying, 'Go home, go home.'

Far away, in the distance, both Lightning and Socks heard a dingo howl, followed by a faint whimper.

'Home! Home!'

Both Socks and Lightning turned their heads towards the Ingegoodbee and the hollow tree that was home. Had not the white hawk called 'Go home!'? That white hawk could be Thowra; it might not be, but both Socks and Lightning were sure it was.

Lightning leapt in the direction of the whimper, and then, as there was no other sound for a moment, he stopped still, listening. He knew, and Socks did too, that a bark would bring the Brumby Hunter after them, so he made no sound. There it came again, an echoing howl and a soft whimper that said plainly to him, 'Lightning, Lightning! Come quickly. Come to me!'

Lightning moved silently, one blue-black paw after another — tiptoeing, tiptoeing — as silently as the snowflakes falling into snow. Socks walked silently, too, the pair of them ghosting along through the night.



Then the whimper came from a little closer, an almost silent whimper that surely would not be heard by the Brumby Hunter.

Lightning began to quicken his steps, still tiptoeing, for nothing must tell the Brumby Hunter where they were. Both Socks and Lightning felt fairly sure that the Brumby Hunter might be rather cruel — just as well not to be seen by him, not to lead him to the hollow tree by the Ingegoodbee River.

Yet Socks still wondered about the Silver Brumby, but it was no good wondering. Really, he was certain that Thowra was safe, with Boon Boon. He knew the cloud of snow was Thowra, also the white hawk — hawk or whirlwind of snow — the Spirit of Thowra, or ghost of the Silver Brumby.

Then suddenly the whimper sounded near their feet. Both the friends stopped in their tracks; they saw at once what Miss Dingo was whimpering for.

Socks stiffened and Lightning let out a low growl, for there was Miss Dingo crying over a pup — her own dog pup, and he was dead.

Poor Miss Dingo; she whimpered and whimpered and licked the dead pup, but nothing could bring him to life. He was bitten all round the head and in the throat, and had been dead for several hours. Miss Dingo had scratches and bites all over her face, too, and she had the smell of another dog all over her. She had obviously tried, with all her strength, to fight the other dog off, but had not succeeded. Lightning began to feel fury rising up inside him. A dog had undoubtedly been violently bullying *his* Miss Dingo and had killed her male pup — his son. Lightning was beginning to feel very angry indeed. Now it was time to seek revenge.

Lightning and Socks followed the track of the dead pup's blood.

Soon they realised that it was leading them in the direction of the Ingegoodbee, and they hurried more.

Lightning's hackles were rising as they got nearer to the hollow tree; Miss Dingo was hanging back and occasionally whimpering with fear.

Lightning was beginning to feel very angry. Suddenly a very strong smell of dog came from the hollow tree, and Lightning went mad with rage, ran towards the tree, and straight into the hollow.

Noise and dust erupted, the noise magnified by the hollow tree. Socks put his head inside to see who was winning — and perhaps to get a mouthful of dog!

No dog was going to hurt *his* Lightning or even Miss Dingo, and he had a picture in his mind of the Brumby Hunter's cattle dog.

So Socks stayed there looking at the dog until he managed to get between his front legs and escape out of the hollow tree, with Lightning after him and Socks after them both.

Miss Dingo, seeing Lightning chasing the dog, howled and howled, then

went inside the hollow tree to make sure the other pups were all right. She looked at the place in the hollow in which her dog pup always curled up and slept, sniffed all around, sat down in it herself, and howled and howled. Finally, she put her head on her front paws and whimpered over and over again.

Lightning and Socks came back and found her still crying, but Lightning had fought and beaten the dog in a fierce tussle, and Socks was very proud, feeling that Lightning had avenged his family. Lightning licked Miss Dingo's torn ears and curled up beside her, then quietly licked her until she went to sleep.

The savage dog might have been beaten by Lightning, but he was not finished, and he started back through the night, limping towards the hollow tree on the Ingegoodbee River.

Socks woke later, feeling that perhaps the marauding dog might return. Everyone else in the hollow tree was sleeping the sleep of the exhausted, so he walked up towards the Ingegoodbee Pools, and there he saw the dog drinking. Socks blew a warning snort through his nostrils. The dog saw him and jumped nervously. The dog knew that Socks and Lightning were great friends and would protect each other to the last gasp — fight each other's battles. He turned back, but not before Socks had decided to follow him to see where he went.

Socks kept himself well hidden and silent, especially when he realised the dog was going north — into the driving snow, north towards Thowra's Secret Valley.

The snow was falling more heavily. Socks was aware, too, that he was getting further and further from Lightning and Miss Dingo, and he felt very uneasy — yet somehow he had to go on. He had to find out if the dog would die after the hiding Lightning had given him or if he would slowly recover? Somehow he thought that heelers were very resilient — tough as tiger snakes. Still, there was an intermittent trail of blood from the wounds Lightning had inflicted and he followed that. The snow fell in larger and larger flakes, thick on the ground now, thick in the air, thick on Socks' eyelashes, matting his mane. He began to wonder if Lightning had woken and missed him — to wonder if he might follow him? They had left the Ingegoodbee Pools a long time ago, and were going south and east from Dead Horse Ridge.

They were, Socks knew, in the area leading to Son of Storm's Hidden Valley, and that meant, eventually, to Thowra's Secret Valley.

Socks was worried, though he had seen no sign of the Brumby Hunter.

What was the wounded dog doing in this country? And why wasn't he with his master? Didn't he have a good master? Perhaps he was undisciplined and a bit of a wanderer.

The only thing to do was to keep following the trail of blood and hope that

perhaps Lightning would wake and come after him.

It was lonely without his companion, his blue-black heeler who had been with him ever since the dog's stockman master had died.

### Three

Then everything began to happen at once. The silence of the snowy night was broken by Lightning's bark and a whip crack, and, suddenly, the snow-muted sound of cantering horses — the sound and the half-vision of Thowra through the falling snow, his marvellous strength — the wonderful Silver Stallion — there then not there, alive and yet vanished.

A furious curse rang out, the Brumby Hunter's voice. It was time for Socks to send a disturbing neigh, and for Lightning to add a wild, distracting bark.

A neigh came again, this time from behind Socks. Somehow, the ghost of Thowra was now behind him. The Brumby Hunter was in front of him — no shadow horse was between them — Socks should charge the Hunter!

He charged! Through the falling snow, even though his eyelashes were matted with snow, he saw the Brumby Hunter's horse before his charge carried him chest-on into it.

He felt the bite of the whip that had cracked a moment earlier. Then his teeth closed on warm flesh. He had the Brumby Hunter's horse by the neck, above the withers, and he hung on.

He hung on all the fiercer as he realised that Lightning was in the fight too!

Then a cold blast of air swirled the snowflakes. Socks let go his mouthful to get a better grip. The Silver Brumby had come to fight his own battle! *And in his own way*, using all the help the weather would give him — the whirling snowflakes, the soft-feathered birds of the air to brush their wings in his assailant's eyes.

Most of all he would use the magic of a whirling dervish pillar of snow to confuse the Hunter — a pillar of snow that somehow could be a rearing horse, or sometimes just a cloud blown hither and thither.

Socks let go his second grip so that he could rear up and strike with his forefeet.

He got in one blow with his off forefoot, then a cloud of snow came around the Brumby Hunter and his horse, and the Hunter was puzzled. From inside the cloud, the Brumby Hunter shouted a rather muffled shout.

Socks could barely see what was happening, but he knew that the Brumby Hunter was turning tail and going, pursued by a cloud of snow, and that cloud was suddenly the shape of a great, strong, silver stallion. There was a rush of

wings and the white owls came again and beat their soft-feathered wings against the head of the Hunter's horse — by then he was galloping.

Socks galloped after him, and a white hawk joined in harassing the Brumby Hunter. Suddenly it seemed to Socks that the Silver Horse had called up all the help he could get from the birds of the air. He thought he'd seen Thowra transform into a hawk once before, in a similar time of trouble. Had Thowra transferred some of his magic to Socks? Was he, himself, the white hawk? Because that white hawk seemed to be 'riding off' the Brumby Hunter's horse away from the cliff that was the edge of the Secret Valley, the edge of the drop.

Socks was certain that Thowra had jumped over that cliff and would be — by some marvellous magic — alive, with Boon Boon, down below.

And down below the Silver Brumby, having seen the Brumby Hunter, was filled with dreams of his beloved high mountains, and perhaps of leading the Brumby Hunter a great dance in that high country. To lead him a dance, Thowra must first get out of the valley, and the only way was through Son of Storm's.

Socks watched. There seemed to be no movement below, but there was movement, and quite silently someone crept up beside him! All he knew was that a sudden, cold blast of air carrying snow covered him all over. Someone was there.

Then his withers was nipped! Out of the snowstorm appeared a silver horse and the one who nipped his withers — Son of Storm.

Socks could only think that Thowra had come up through Son of Storm's Hidden Valley.

Now what were they going to do — that silver horse and the big brown son of Thowra's half-brother?

Storm had always run with Thowra, and here was Son of Storm backing him up in some wild escapade in the high mountains.

Son of Storm nipped Socks again on the withers, and bent and tugged at Lightning's ear, so the two friends followed him.

Socks thought he heard a distant sound of galloping hooves coming from the direction in which they were going, but all he really could think of was the cloud of snow that wavered and blew in front of them — Thowra or a ghost!

Then he realised that the sound of a galloping horse was getting closer and closer. Surely it was not the Brumby Hunter returning?

For one instant the snowfall seemed to abate — and Socks saw the Brumby Hunter and his horse quite clearly. Man and galloping horse were heading in a direct line for that willy-willy of snow, and what would happen if they clashed?

With a gasp, Socks stopped to watch the inevitable confrontation, but suddenly the elements themselves took a hand.

Snow came pouring down. Horse and rider, silver cloud, were all invisible, and then out of the snow storm there galloped a great, strong silver stallion, but there was no sign of the Brumby Hunter.

Socks galloped forward to the place where they should have met — what had really happened then? The vanishing Silver Brumby had vanished again.

The Brumby Hunter's horse somehow was gone. What made it invisible?

Socks stared at the shape which he thought was *prosanthera* bush, but could see nothing. After a while he noticed what looked like the possibility of a depression in the ground behind some bushes.

Socks moved forward, but not as quickly as Lightning did. Lightning's curiosity had been aroused. How could the Brumby Hunter's horse run headlong into the Silver Brumby and then vanish, leaving neither hide nor hair nor even a hoofmark? There must be *something*.

Dog and horse, they looked all around but could see nothing unusual, yet they were sure that there was something strange about this small grassy hollow. Socks moved one foot and the hoof-fall sounded hollow on the ground.

Where had he heard that hollow sound before?

There was a picture coming into his mind of a great grassy flat and a little stream flowing through it; what had this got to do with the two secret valleys?

Quambat Flat? Quambat Flat? It was quite a distance away? But there was a sunken hollow there — where the ground sounded hollow under a horse's galloping hooves.

Socks knew it quite well — remembered the hollow sound. Now he and Lightning stood tense and still — listening. Then, they heard a muffled neigh and — less muffled and quite recognisable — curses in the Brumby Hunter's voice, and a queerly echoing whip-crack. And the whimper of the Hunter's injured dog.

Both horse and dog stopped entirely still — there was something eerie about the sounds — not ordinary. They were close by — there, and yet not there — so close and yet more distant.

Even Lightning was baffled.

He could usually tell exactly where a sound was coming from. This time, somehow, it came from all around them.

Then the neigh came again, and for one flashing second they seemed to see through a cave wall, see a silver horse rearing up, threatening the Brumby Hunter with its forelegs. A scream rang out and everything blacked out.

Both Socks and Lightning sprang forwards and found themselves in a terrifyingly narrow dark space — and galloping hooves rang hollowly far ahead.

Lightning began to sniff a way out of their enclosure in the darkness, Socks

following him closely — and both of them listening keenly to the hoof-beats ahead.

It was a narrow passage, but had to have held Thowra *and* the Brumby Hunter's horse and rider.

Then the sound of hooves began to change; fewer echoes, as if they were galloping in a more open space.

The darkness began to go faintly grey — Lightning quickened his pace ... a little faster, a little faster, until suddenly they burst out into glittering, silver light — and were on a platform behind a waterfall!

They stopped! Where was the Brumby Hunter? Where was the glorious silver stallion?

## Four

There had been a legend of Thowra's son Wirramirra escaping from a bushfire by becoming part of the spray of a waterfall; was Thowra vanishing now, by becoming the spray from a wonderful waterfall as it emerged from a hillside?

Cold, cold water, from the depths of the earth; icy water filled with mountain magic.

Socks crept closer, extending his nose, and there he saw the Silver Brumby, standing in the centre of the falling water, a perfect and lovely horse — every line of him expressing love of life, expressing love.

Lightning pressed against Socks's foreleg. Thowra's expression was the same as when he and Boon Boon had stood looking in the friends' sandy cave one night promising safety, and as far as Lightning was concerned, all was right with the world. He and Socks were safe.

The Silver Brumby would be safe and he would guide Socks and Lightning back to his Secret Valley; sometime they would get back to the hollow tree on the Ingegoodbee and Lightning's dear Miss Dingo.

Lightning and Socks stood watching the Silver Brumby, sometimes half-hidden in the silver spray. Sometimes the spray itself seemed to fly into the shape of a rearing horse.

Then suddenly Lightning's hackles rose. There, above the waterfall, where the stream gushed out of the mountainside, stood the Brumby Hunter's horse, the Brumby Hunter sitting firmly in the saddle.

Perhaps Thowra had seen him and did not care?

What would happen next?

Thowra seemed almost to be teasing, never coming out of the lace of falling water. Lightning got tired of waiting. He knew he could safely walk along the ledge of rock that became quite a wide shelf below the falling water.

He began to tiptoe carefully across. Socks followed as far as he could before the rock grew very slippery. From there he watched Lightning going under the silver spray — shaking the water out of his ears.

Socks took a few tentative steps forward — glistening black as the spray soaked him — then Thowra saw both Lightning and Socks and came towards them, not realising that the Brumby Hunter was following.

Lightning saw what was going to happen and dodged past Thowra, his claws



clinging to the wet, slippery band of limestone.

The Brumby Hunter cursed! Lightning hurled himself at the horse and there was a slithering and scrabbling of hooves, a great barking from Lightning, a furious curse from the Brumby Hunter, two neighs from Thowra and Socks.

Quite a commotion!

Thowra seemed to pivot on his neat, hard hooves and almost dive down the waterfall. To Socks it looked like suicide, but he heard a little whinny from Thowra which undoubtedly said, 'Follow me,' and he charged down through the water — aware, as he went, that Lightning was following.

Thowra leapt from wet, slippery rock to wet, slippery rock — Socks tried desperately to put his feet on the same rocks, and to call to Lightning. From one fairly stable, stone platform he looked back to see if his friend was safe behind, and saw that the Brumby Hunter's horse had slipped off the limestone track and Lightning was forcing it to slide.

He paused for a moment and called, saw Lightning throw up his head and then turn through all the glistening spray and come after him.

Thowra had managed to get a little further ahead. Socks tried to go faster — and found his feet slipping.

He was trying hard to save himself and realised, gratefully, that Lightning was quite close and getting closer. Then he saw that Thowra seemed to be waiting, standing on a flat rock on which the spray kept constantly breaking.

Socks tried to steer his slide towards that rock. Lightning was beside him now, his claws stopping him sliding so fast, but unable to help. Thowra stood waiting.

Socks made a huge effort and slid closer towards the flat rock. Lightning was there already.

Socks's slide slowed and Thowra and Lightning both grabbed him.

Silver horse, black-and-blue dog, black horse with the four white socks — there they all were, covered in glittering spray from the waterfall, tight together on the flat rock.

Thowra gave Socks a little nip to follow him, and tugged at Lightning's ear. Then he jumped into the falling water.

There was nothing for Socks and Lightning to do but follow.

## Five

Water crashed and sparkled all around them.

There was the shape of the Silver Horse ahead — there shining silver, and then just a shape made of diamond spray, like Wirramirra had been when the fire was on ‘the tops’.

Socks felt Lightning against his legs, but he knew that they must both walk forward — however slippery the rocks were — to join Thowra and go with him.

In fact Thowra was just moving slightly and Socks could see some sort of a corridor beyond him, and the creek rushing down the floor of it.

The corridor looked quite dim, and as Thowra moved out of the waterfall, he walked into darkness.

Socks did not like the look of it, but Thowra gave that faint, whinnying neigh that quite clearly said, ‘Follow me.’

Socks and Lightning followed. More suddenly than they expected, they were in the darkness, so thick that one could feel it. Ahead were the faint sounds of neat hooves on limestone.

The morning light came quickly. Thowra went through a horizontal grevillea that Lightning realised hid this opening from the corridor, and saw that the grevillea grew on the banks of the creek.

They were in the Secret Valley, but both Socks and Lightning were puzzled about the way they had got there. Memory seemed filled with a shining waterfall that clothed a silver horse, or even a silver horse that became a shining waterfall, but Thowra was starting to trot along the valley floor.

That evening Socks and Lightning were curled up on the sandy floor of their usual cave — but Lightning was restless, and when the sky above the valley began to get darker and dingo howls started to echo in the hills around, he got up and began to pace around. The howls were making his longing for Miss Dingo even stronger.

He knew the sound of Miss Dingo’s howl among many others, and her howl was not there, but the dingo voices were making him more and more disturbed.

He walked to the mouth of the cave and back again. Socks watched him anxiously.

Then a bark — exactly like Lightning’s bark — sounded far away and high

above.

The Brumby Hunter's dog!

The Brumby Hunter must have worked his way back to the cliff above the Secret Valley. Perhaps he may never have seen Thowra vanishing in the silver spray of a waterfall.

Socks got to his feet, too, and found himself looking straight at Thowra, who had come to the mouth of the cave.

Thowra gave a very soft whinny to call them to follow, and led them back up the valley, and soon Socks saw that they were going to make their way out of the Secret Valley, the way they had come.

Though the snow had stopped and the sky had cleared, that was not exactly Socks's idea of fun! And how did they jump *up* a waterfall, anyway?

It was best to follow the Silver Brumby without hesitating.

There was that dog barking again. His bark did not sound friendly like Lightning's bark did. Socks felt the hair rising on his back, even as he followed Thowra, and he was shivering as he crept round the horizontal grevillea into the black, dark tunnel.

He followed on, trying to imagine Thowra shining silver in the darkness.

It would not be long till they reached the place where they had jumped down the waterfall. *Was the Silver Brumby going to try and jump up it?*

Lightning was nervous, too, in that dark tunnel, but Thowra kept striding on.

They would soon be out of the tunnel — and what then! Socks was almost holding his breath; Lightning's heart was beating uncomfortably. *His* feet, with their claws, did not slip on the wet limestone. Socks's feet did keep slipping.

He could hear the tapping of Thowra's hooves ahead; it was an encouraging sound in that black, dark tunnel, but he felt his heart beating harder and harder against his ribs.

There had been faint moonlight before they went into the tunnel, but Socks was not expecting a full moon to have risen above the waterfall, and was surprised when suddenly Thowra, in front of him, stepped out of the tunnel into the glittering silver spray, so that he was standing there, cast in silver.

Socks stopped and Lightning bumped into his hind legs, but then looked up in amazement. There was Thowra, still standing, as though made of molten silver, looking keenly to the right of the waterfall. Something seemed to have cast a spell over him, but both Lightning and Socks realised that he was gazing at the rocks beside the waterfall, working out footholds where they could climb up.

Then the dingo howls started again — a song to the risen moon.

Thowra moved forward a few steps — to the right of the waterfall. Socks, so

relieved that they were perhaps not going to jump *up* the waterfall, took a couple of steps after him into the moonlight. Looking down he saw that his own white socks were shining silver. Suddenly he felt as though he were touched by magic, and that his silver fetlocks should be able to carry him anywhere that the Silver Brumby went.

Carefully Socks watched where Thowra put each foot, and he, too, started to climb the great tumble of rocks beside the waterfall.

Thowra might be magic, but Socks felt that his legs had magic in them, too, and looking down beside him, he saw Lightning silvered over by moonlit spray and felt assured that Lightning was fired with magic, too.

Obviously Lightning, with his sharp claws, could climb the tumble of rocks, all wet with spray, more easily than Socks could, but however difficult it was, they would both be lent some magic by the moon.

On and on the enchanted three went, led by the glittering magic of the Silver Horse.

## Six

It was a difficult climb but never impossible, not with the Silver Horse moving on ahead. Socks found it easier if he managed to keep close behind Thowra, putting his feet exactly where Thowra's neat hooves had been.

Lightning was right beside him, climbing easily.

Sometimes they heard the Brumby Hunter's dog bark, but it was some distance away. Lightning knew well not to answer it. *He* knew that they were, all three, really in hiding — or seeking a hiding place that was not in the Secret Valley.

In fact the Silver Brumby was intending to lead the Brumby Hunter right away from his Secret Valley. He knew that there was very little chance of hiding from that man and his dog except in the Secret Valley, and now the Brumby Hunter had an idea where that was, perhaps even had an idea that Thowra had jumped into it, but he certainly would not know just how; not even that clever Brumby Hunter would imagine him jumping over the edge of the cliff, landing on one ledge, and jumping off it onto another, till he reached the valley floor. The way into the Secret Valley would always be his secret; he had never yet shown anyone else. One day he might show Socks, but Socks would never leave Lightning, and to get down the cliff Lightning would have to fly.

All the time he was thinking, Thowra was moving upwards; clouds had come across and snow was falling quietly; not much snow lay on the ground till they got higher. Flakes were falling into the head of the Crackenback River when they crossed it.

Socks knew where they were going. Thowra was making for the Ramsheads — his country forever and ever.

Socks was glad because he knew the Ramshead country, and the Leatherbarrel Valley, and he followed the Silver Brumby as though he had springs in his legs, feeling wonderfully inspired by the strength of the silver horse. Maybe some of the magic that flowed from Thowra had really gone to him and to Lightning.

Socks glanced at Lightning and saw that he looked pleased and happy, but, he thought, as soon as the dingoes started howling if the moon reappeared, Lightning would worry about Miss Dingo.

Up the three climbed, passing the rocky tor where the last of the snowgrass

grew.

Snow was still falling quietly, and except for the wild calls of a flock of currawongs, high above, there was no sound.

They climbed up to the South Ramshead, and the higher they reached, the thicker the snow on the ground became. Thowra trotted almost printlessly over the fresh snow. Socks also knew it was important to leave as few hoofmarks as possible.

With a break in the clouds, the moon appeared, silvering the whole of the main range, and the dingo howls began in the forest below them. Lightning cocked his ears, listening. Socks looked around, just to make sure Miss Dingo and her pups were not following, though he knew that her call was not blended in with the others.

Suddenly he became transfixed with something he saw on the opposite slopes — above the Leatherbarrel Valley — two shadow horses and perhaps a shadow dog; moon shadows. Socks stared at those shadows as he trotted along behind Thowra. He did not realise that they were his shadow, Thowra's and Lightning's — shadows thrown by the now-strong moon. Then, as he looked, he saw the shadow of a third horse — and rider — coming up behind.

He heard Lightning give a low growl and looked quite sharply behind. There, just near enough to throw a moon shadow behind their own, the Brumby Hunter must have worked out that Thowra would make for his own country.

Socks began to feel terrible. Thowra must be quite certain that he was not followed. Lightning should do more than growl. Socks turned round, but Lightning was already running towards the Brumby Hunter, and Thowra had looked around and seen his danger.

Socks saw the Brumby Hunter swing his arm and knew he was getting ready to use his whip — *use it on Lightning* — and in blinding fury he turned and galloped back through the moonlit rock tors. Behind him he heard a stallion's scream of rage and thundering hooves. Thowra was coming, too.

The Brumby Hunter stopped in uttermost surprise; the Silver Horse whom he was hunting was now charging him, and the black horse with white socks was leading him on. Lightning began to bark as he went, flat out, towards the horse and rider, and the dog with the same bark gave a very menacing growl.

That growl was too much for Lightning. Instead of going for the Hunter's horse, he headed straight for the dog, like a hurricane.

The dog dodged to one side but Lightning guessed which way he would go, and hurled himself at him with such force that he knocked the Hunter's dog endways.

Socks heard the whip crack and saw the Hunter sitting on his horse, raising

his whip arm. That was too much for Socks. He charged the Brumby Hunter, throwing up his head at the last moment, and hitting him chest-on. The horse winded, it rocked on its feet, and fell, throwing the Brumby Hunter off.

Just then Thowra came galloping back. The Brumby Hunter pulled his horse on to its feet and went to spring into the saddle, but he was still off when Thowra leapt at him and his horse.

The dogs were fighting and got muddled up in the scrum, Socks rushed in to protect Thowra and Lightning. He grabbed the other dog by the scruff and threw him to one side, then he picked up the whip with his teeth and dragged it away from the Hunter's hand.

Thowra simply stood, with heaving flanks, staring at the Hunter who was without a whip or a dog, then, strangely, he bowed his head and backed away, calling Socks in his quiet little whinny.

Socks gave Lightning's ear a tug, so Lightning left the fight. Socks picked up the whip again, and gladly followed Thowra up through the thickened snow.

Looking back, Socks saw the dog get up and go for a pat from his master. He thought to himself that the Brumby Hunter would not give up too easily, and had not the Silver Brumby a gleam in his eye when he bowed to the Hunter? In fact, Thowra was almost dancing along into the Ramsheads.

Snow began to fall more steadily; tracks would be covered.

Socks and Lightning both suddenly felt light-hearted and happy, as though they would follow the Silver Brumby forever.

## Seven

Thowra looked back through the falling flakes and the intermittently moonlit night. There was no sign of the great Brumby Hunter, but the Silver Brumby knew better than to think that the Hunter would give up so easily. There was a round snow dome ahead of them, just asking to be climbed. He trotted on, Socks and Lightning trotting happily with him, but both aware that the Brumby Hunter was somewhere behind them, invisible in the curtain of falling snow.

As they got higher up the North Ramshead, wind began to swirl the snow in spiralling gusts around them.

Socks noticed that Lightning looked behind them very often. The dog was somehow carrying the Hunter's stockwhip, but he was having difficulty in climbing steeply. Suddenly he opened his mouth and barked. His open mouth dropped the whip. He had seen the Brumby Hunter not far away.

Socks and Thowra both heard the Brumby Hunter's horse galloping, and came down a little way to meet him. Lightning ran too, but then he remembered the dropped stockwhip and turned back.

Out of the flailing snow storm came the Brumby Hunter. Lightning knew better than to bark this time.

With his teeth clamped on the whip handle, he rushed at the horse.

Socks came galloping down the lower slopes of the North Ramshead. He was afraid that his beloved Lightning might get hurt and was going to punish the Brumby Hunter, and make sure nothing happened to Lightning.

Socks knew that brumby stallions had gone for bush-walkers before this, and he was well aware that he could frighten off the Brumby Hunter.

Then he heard Lightning bark. 'If he has opened his mouth to bark, he must have dropped the whip,' thought Socks.

Socks went faster, but the Brumby Hunter was going faster still. Lightning grabbed the whip, but knew he was powerless to crack it. He went hurtling on towards the horse and rider, and really felt he should turn on a terrifying, screaming bark — which would mean opening his mouth.

He heard a scream behind him, Socks's stallion scream, and saw the Brumby Hunter check his pace.

Lightning felt comforted — knowing that Socks was coming in support. He was getting very close to the Hunter's horse. He opened his mouth and barked —



and the whip fell!

Lightning picked up the whip by the handle and made a great rush at the horse. The Brumby Hunter sprang off his horse and made a run at Lightning's mouthful of whip handle. Lightning dodged and bit the Hunter's hand.

'You bugger,' the Hunter yelled, and pulled out his handkerchief to mop up the bleeding hand. Then he seized on the whip again, and pulled hard.

Lightning dug in his toes and hung on. Socks was coming, so he *hung on*.

A wild, stallion call rang out from further up the North Ramshead. Thowra had seen what was happening and he was going to join in, too.

Socks was a heavy horse, and anything that got the full force of his charge would find it difficult to keep on its feet.

The Brumby Hunter was knocked flat in the snow, but he still wanted his whip, and hung onto it for grim death.

Lightning hung on, too.

Socks circled around to line up for another charge, and saw out of one corner of his eye that Thowra was quite close. He was glad. Support was coming.

'Drop it, you mongrel!' the Brumby Hunter shouted at Lightning, and gave a tremendous tug at the whip, twisting the handle so that it hurt the dog's mouth.

Then Socks charged again, and this time sent the Brumby Hunter flying. When he could clear the snow out of his eyes, the Hunter saw Thowra rearing up over the top of him.

Then the rearing image of a silver horse became a whirlwind willy-willy of snow — something that could not be caught with a lasso, or hit with a whip.

The willy-willy died down, and there was the Silver Horse again.

'Good God,' the Brumby Hunter swore, 'am I chasing a horse or a ghost?' and just then Socks knocked him flat again. But Socks and Lightning and the Silver Brumby thought it was now time to go, taking the whip with them.

This time Thowra led them round the North Ramshead and over the rock tors of the Ramshead Range. They chased the Brumby Hunter's horse off, and could hear him calling it! Socks was amused. He looked back once and saw the Brumby Hunter on his feet, running after Lightning, calling him to come, because he badly wanted his whip. Thowra looked back, too — with a gleam in his eye. The Brumby Hunter was not accustomed to walking, but his horse was standing fairly close, waiting to be caught.

Thowra headed into the granite tor country that he knew so well, and that Socks knew, too, so Socks was happy. Only Lightning was missing Miss Dingo. She had been with them on their last visit, and he kept thinking he should see her, kept thinking he should hear her.

Somehow he was sure she was close. The wind swirled the snow around and

a dingo howl came, carried and twisted by a willy-willy, and echoing in the rocks.

Suddenly Lightning barked. He felt he had to let Miss Dingo know where he was and he barked again.

The wind dropped for a moment, and in the eerie silence moonlight came through the falling snow, making the lunar landscape of the Ramshead tors more ghostly still. A dingo howl sounded from fairly close, yet it was as if it rolled round a rocky cavern. Lightning barked again. He was certain that Miss Dingo had come to find him. He even hurried ahead of Thowra, going straight for the opening of the cave where he and Socks had hidden before.

There, in the opening, he saw Miss Dingo who was making excited greeting noises. She had left the older pups with the job of looking after the younger ones while she was away, and asked one of her friends to look in on them now and again. She had learnt from the death of her male pup that it was no longer safe to leave her youngest puppies alone.

Lightning bounded forward, Socks close behind, Thowra, too, and as they all squeezed into the cave in the rocks, Lightning licked all around Miss Dingo's face.

After a while, Thowra went out to see if there were any signs of the Brumby Hunter, though he knew that his tracks and Socks's would be snowed over or blown away in the wind.

Socks went out with him and they both stood there staring through the falling snow. Suddenly they saw the shadowy horseman coming slowly along, his horse's shoes balling up and then the balls of snow breaking down on one hoof so that it trod unevenly.

Thowra crept round the back of the rocks that hid their cave, and then through a rock passage that led out in front of the Brumby Hunter — there he reared up and danced around on his hind legs, half-hidden by falling snow.

The Brumby Hunter's dog barked. The Brumby Hunter reined in and sat staring at the Silver Horse dancing in the snowflakes.

Ghost or horse? Ghost or horse? The apparition vanished. Even the watchers from the cave could no longer see it, but presently Thowra crept into the cave from a back way.

## *Eight*

Thowra knew it was the start of what was going to be a very heavy winter, and he thought that they should all get going for lower country immediately — not wait for daylight as a big dump of snow might come in the night — so he nudged Socks and nipped Lightning on the ear and led them off into the blizzard.

Thowra found ways through the bush that neither Socks nor Lightning had ever known, and they, with Miss Dingo, followed with implicit trust in that great silver horse.

Both Socks and Lightning still felt that somehow they had been given some of Thowra's strength and power — some of his magic — when they followed him up the waterfall from the tunnel that led from the Secret Valley. It was as if they, too, possessed magic that would take them safely through the mountains — safely through blizzard and tornado, through flood and fire, and over a frozen land.

Sheet-ice might be beneath their hooves and feet, and there would always be the sound of slithering and sliding, but the magic touch of Thowra would give them strength and balance and speed to cope with all dangers. Feeling this strength, like a gift of magic, Socks and Lightning went on with the Silver Brumby through the half-moonlit, snowy night, and Miss Dingo trotted happily along beside Lightning, asking no more than to be with him again and heading back towards the hollow tree on the Ingegoodbee River and the pups that were waiting for her.

They crossed three creeks before those creeks come together, above the waterfall, to make the big body of water which they could hear crashing below. Were they going to jump into the waterfall and go down that way? If so, how would Miss Dingo manage? Then they were there beside the spray that flew up and all around them.

This was the place where Thowra had hurled himself down, becoming part of the water, part of the spray — a shining silver horse. Lightning and Socks had hurled themselves down, too — somehow filled with the courage and magic of the Silver Brumby.

Would this magic still work?

What about Miss Dingo?

But Thowra was thinking of her, too. He took her by the scruff of her neck,

walked a few steps into the spray, then sprang into the centre of the fall.

Lightning watched, horrified for a moment and then became completely trusting as he saw Thowra's head above the falling water and the little dingo held above the turbulent stream.

They bobbed up and down a few times, but mostly Thowra held Miss Dingo above water. Lightning and Socks kept up with them because they were anxious for Miss Dingo, but, even though anxious, there was certainty of her safety with Thowra. Soon they were all standing together below the waterfall. Thowra was helping Lightning to lick Miss Dingo dry.

There was still the long, dark tunnel to get through, but Miss Dingo would see better in the dark than Lightning or Socks, Socks thought, and realised he did not much like the limestone passage himself.

As Thowra started to move towards the tunnel, Lightning got closer to Miss Dingo.

'It's time,' Socks thought, and found himself wishing that he and Miss Dingo could soon be at the hollow tree on the Ingegoodbee, all warm and snug with the pups.

Thowra looked around once and then began to walk towards the tunnel. He tugged Miss Dingo's ear to tell her to follow.

The last Socks saw of Thowra, Miss Dingo and Lightning, they were going into the dark tunnel through a curtain of half-lit snowflakes, Miss Dingo right beside the Silver Brumby, and his beloved Lightning beside her.

Then Socks went into the dark himself, and when his eyes got used to the gloom, all he could see was the faint shape of a silver horse and the blur of Miss Dingo. His blue-black Lightning was invisible.

He knew the Secret Valley was ahead, beyond the end of the tunnel that was masked by the grevillea bush. As he followed Thowra, Miss Wild Echoes Ringing Dingo and Lightning round the grevillea bush, Socks could see that snow was barely falling, just a few big rose-petal flakes, and through those flakes, he could see Boon Boon waiting for them, and dear Son of Storm.

## Nine

Snow was falling thickly the next morning. Thowra had felt quite rightly that it was the start of a heavy winter. Now Socks thought he and Lightning and Miss Dingo should make for home. The hollow tree on the Ingegoodbee was perhaps low enough not to get too much snow. Anyway, Lightning and the pups would catch rabbits even if there were snow — they had done it before.

So that morning Thowra, knowing they should go, came to see them off round the cliff into Son of Storm's valley.

A robin redbreast flew along ahead of them, round the cliff, scarlet breast against the snow, it flitted from rock to rock, bush to bush. Once it sang for them — the robin's song of winter which said, 'Happiness, Happiness'. They edged around a swamp. A few dried flower heads of candle heath stood up out of the snow, and the robin balanced on one. Socks crept along the track, watching the robin, occasionally giving a little whinny of encouragement to Miss Dingo.

Miss Dingo did not really need any encouragement at all. She knew they were headed for home and it made her think about how much she missed that dog pup, who had been mauled by the Brumby Hunter's dog. She knew how empty the hollow tree was without him. She had not wanted to stay in the nice warm cave in Thowra's Valley, but had longed to get home, particularly as the snow falling more heavily made travelling difficult. Somehow, subconsciously, she still expected to find her dog pup.

They found the valley of the Cascades full of snow, and that made Socks hurry even more. The three travellers kept close together, even closer when they saw a strange dingo, and when they heard the swiftly repeated staccato bark of a giant glider possum.

Socks knew all the bush birds and animals very well, knew their voices and habits, but even he was disconcerted when he saw an owl sitting beside the Ingegoodbee Pools.

It did not seem to have seen the three travellers, and all of a sudden it gave a call — 'Mopoke! Mopoke!' — and another owl answered from some distance off, 'Beware winter! Beware winter!'

Socks stood quite still, thinking. It is true what the owl says. 'Beware winter!'

The snow started to fall more heavily. Thowra knew it was going to be a

heavy winter. Son of Storm knew it, too. Poor Miss Dingo was going to miss her dog pup even more in the long, dark days ahead.

Socks watched the mopoke take off towards Rawson's Flat. He would not hear that call again till spring and mating time, but before that he might hear the bronze cuckoo's mournful whistle, just like Lightning's master's whistle. He started on towards the hollow tree, thinking of the mopoke and the old dead stockman and Lightning.

Darkness came in and no promise of moonlight shining through falling flakes. The hollow tree stood out above the river and Socks walked towards it, watching Lightning and Miss Dingo walking together. The other pups came out to greet them. Miss Dingo was pleased to see them, but she obviously felt that the one who was missing should have been there.

When they went into the hollow, there was the round nest that the dog pup had made himself, and in which he had always slept — but no dog pup came, however much Miss Dingo expected him to appear. She went over to the nest and howled once, then came back to the other pups and Lightning.

There was no food, no rabbits, so Lightning had to go hunting and bring some rabbit back. Presently they all settled down for the night. Miss Dingo looked over at the dog pup's nest, and finally curled up in it herself, whimpering. After a while Lightning curled up beside her and licked away her tears, and they slept there together.

But Lightning had a score to settle. The Brumby Hunter's dog had killed the male pup.

Socks was wondering about Thowra. He knew he would have to go back because the Brumby Hunter was still somewhere near the Secret Valley — and so was his dog — but he suspected that Lightning wouldn't go back with him, even if he did have a score to settle with the dog.

So it was that Socks set off on his own for Thowra's Secret Valley, leaving the hollow tree one night as the full moon was waning.

Lightning licked his nose in farewell as Socks put his head down to the old dog. Then Socks went on his rather lonely way — wondering what he would find — Thowra in his Secret Valley, or Son of Storm with news of a big struggle and perhaps news of the death of the Brumby Hunter, trying to get down the cliff. Or would Thowra have gone off on his own to the Ramshead country — *his* country?

As he passed the Ingegoodbee Pools, Socks was beginning to feel more and more certain that Thowra would lead the Brumby Hunter a dance in the high country. There he would be absolutely in his own well-known country. He would know every hiding place.

Socks quickened his pace. He reached the Cascades in much better time than usual, in spite of quite heavy snow on the ground. Then he took an easterly line towards Thowra's Secret Valley, ploughing through heavy snow as he got higher up.

At last he crept into Son of Storm's Hidden Valley, thinking it might be best to go from there to Thowra's Secret Valley and check whether Thowra was there before looking elsewhere for the Brumby Hunter.

Son of Storm seemed to know he was coming and greeted him with pleasure and friendship, then, as the dawn had not yet come, he escorted Socks to the nice dry cave in which Lightning and Socks had slept. There Socks lay down to rest, because he had covered a long distance very quickly and was tired.

He slept and was surprised to see Son of Storm asleep, too, when he woke; and wonderful, too, was it to see Lightning, who had travelled through the whole night to join him.

At the first grey sign of dawn, the three of them started round the cliffs to Thowra's Secret Valley. Then through the grey dawn they could just see Thowra's shape, and yes, Benni the kangaroo. They appeared to be almost tiptoeing, if a kangaroo could tiptoe! Thowra was making no sound at all, and looking all around as he climbed.

Socks had heard tales of Benni the kangaroo, and he guessed that Benni had come with a message for Thowra — perhaps something about the Brumby Hunter. Then he heard the whispering snowflakes, and their whisper as they fell through the sky told of the Brumby Hunter looking for the Silver Brumby's tracks along the edge of the cliff, where surely he must have jumped — tracks that would tell if he had jumped to his death, or not.

There was Thowra, marvellously alive! What did the Brumby Hunter believe about him, anyway? Was it, as some said, just a ghost that the Hunter was hunting?

## Ten

The 'ghost' climbed silently up the cliff track, Benni beside him. When he reached Socks and Son of Storm he signalled them to follow him back. Except for going into Son of Storm's Valley there was nowhere to get to from the top of the track, and from the whispering snowflakes, they were safer hidden in the valley than getting out into the bush above.

Socks was wondering where Lightning was? He would like to have a go at punishing the Hunter's dog himself. That dog deserved a hiding for killing Miss Dingo's pup.

Thowra led them down onto the valley floor, and they got there just as the snowfall slackened. Thowra looked up and for one instant saw the Brumby Hunter. By the way he stared down, as though transfixed, Thowra was sure he had been seen. It was almost as if there had been eye contact between the Hunter and the hunted — the man and the Silver Horse — but the cliff top was too distant.

It was not too distant, however, for the man to make out the misty form of a silver horse standing on the valley floor in the falling flakes. 'Like a cat with nine lives', he cursed. 'How the hell did you get there?' Then the snow began to fall more steadily and blocked the man's vision, making Thowra less clear.

Socks's eyelids were matted with flakes, but he could still see the man and his dog and he heard the swearing; at the same time he wondered, 'What now? Here are we, and here is that man. How can I get at the dog and pay him back for killing that dear pup? How can I stop the man hurting Thowra?'

Thowra knew what to do. He climbed back into Son of Storm's Valley, leading Socks and Son of Storm, and then got up onto higher ground so that he could go round to mock the man on the cliff top. Socks wondered what way Thowra would take. Of course, if he were going to go jumping over the cliff, Socks would not know the way, but perhaps he would just lead the Hunter up into the Ramshead Range.

Socks followed with perfect trust, finding again that he seemed to have gained something from Thowra, more spring, more ability to climb slippery rocks. But something wasn't right — he couldn't hear Son of Storm behind him. He turned around to look for his friend, but he was nowhere to be seen. 'He must have gone home,' thought Socks. 'Maybe there is more than one entry to the



valley.'

They hurried, hoping to find the Brumby Hunter still there — and there he was, determined to find a way down into the valley, but the snow had covered the indented front hoofmarks where Thowra had jumped.

Thowra skirted round, far enough behind the Hunter and his dog to be neither seen nor heard, and went on further up through the bush, apparently looking for something. He found his way through the prosanthera bushes which suddenly opened out and revealed a promontory of rocky slate. Thowra stepped up onto it without making any sound and looked down on the Brumby Hunter. He was too far away to make eye contact now. Instead he threw up his head and neighed, one of his most come-hither neighs. Up from down in the bushes there floated a furious curse, 'You bugger! I'll get you!'

Thowra melted backward through the bush, and then led Socks on upwards. Presently they both heard the Brumby Hunter's horse crashing through the scrub, following.

Thowra quickened his pace a little. He had his mind set on those rock tors of the Ramshead area. Already he could imagine the snow flying from his galloping hooves as he dodged around the rocks, and hear his neighs echoing off those rocks as he hid from the Brumby Hunter. Perhaps he might even stop to roll in the snow. Such fun, such fun!

But there was quite a long way to go before he and Socks reached the Ramshead tors, and once they got above the tree line they would not hear the Brumby Hunter's horse following.

The Brumby Hunter could still hear Thowra's mocking neighs, and they made him more careless than he might have been.

Once Thowra stopped and watched till his hunter got quite close, then from behind huge rocks he snorted snow at him — and then vanished!

It was easier for Thowra to disappear in a snow storm than for the black horse, Socks, but Socks was learning a few tricks from Thowra. All the same it was Socks, himself, who thought of standing under a snow-bowed young tree and shaking it so that its snow fell in great blobs on his black hide.

They had travelled very fast but, in spite of their speed, it was already getting dark and the wind was rising. They could sometimes hear the wind's howl round the rocks. A willy-willy of snow swirled and rose up from the Leatherbarrel, buffeting them, filling up their hoofmarks.

A little further to go, and they would be among the rocky tors. The snow was wind-hardened now that they were getting higher up. Once they heard the Brumby Hunter's horse neigh. It was then that Socks saw the crevice in the rocks where he and Lightning, Miss Dingo, and the pups had once sheltered, and

wishing that they were still with him, he went towards the narrow opening.

Just then the Brumby Hunter's horse neighed and Socks neighed a wild call to the sky. Startled, Socks pushed his way into the narrow opening, away from the hundred and one echoes — some of them going far and wide, some of them muffled by the falling snow.

Thowra was looking startled, too, and he surprised Socks by quickly squeezing through the opening and, once inside, throwing a wild neigh.

Socks and Thowra were almost deafened by the enormous cacophony of calls.

They realised that the wild echoes would cause the Brumby Hunter to wonder where they were.

Both Socks and Thowra made out the Hunter's shape go past two or three or four times ... searching ... searching ... searching ... Thowra threw another echoing neigh, to confuse the Hunter even more.

A dingo howled in the distance. Socks was certain it was Miss Dingo so he stuck his head out of the crevice, where there would be no echoes, and called, but Thowra pulled him by the ear. They were going to return to the Secret Valley.

## Eleven

Thowra ducked back through the fissure just once more. Socks felt him go but even so he was not expecting the wild, rolling, echoing neigh. Then the echoes were taken up by the rocky hills around and above and rolled about.

The echoes were still rolling around as Thowra and Socks started for the Secret Valley, but as they turned down off the Ramshead Range, the lingering howl of a dingo was carried on the wind, and the howl was followed by a bark. Socks knew that Lightning and Miss Dingo were looking for him, and he began to go a little faster, urging Thowra on.

Another bark, just slightly different, stopped them in their tracks. It was not Lightning's and was above and behind them. Suddenly Socks turned back — he would try to confuse the Brumby Hunter again. He hurried, cantering through the snow. It was not far to go to that fissure in the rocks. In his impatience to set those wild echoes ringing in every direction, he put his head through the narrow opening and called. Then he stepped back to listen. The sound came booming and rising to a high note. He pushed his head back in again, and this time gave a stallion scream. It almost pierced his eardrum; it was *wild*. As the echoes rolled, dying round the Ramshead tors — eerie in the falling snow — he heard the faintest of whinnies from close by, and knew Thowra had come back for him, so he stepped down from the fissure that led to the echo cave.

As Socks joined Thowra, he heard the distant dingo howl again, and was even more certain that it was Miss Dingo. Then came the bark that he absolutely knew was Lightning's, and could hardly stop himself from neighing in answer. Dear Lightning, he missed him so, missed his company. Even though they had only been apart for a short while, it seemed like a lifetime because so much had happened and there had been so much uncertainty. Socks was glad his dear friend was safe. He remembered the old stockman's whistle that was so like a bronze cuckoo's in springtime. Poor Lightning, how the cuckoos' calls had upset him when he heard them, and he knew his old master was dead.

Socks thought he would risk sending his special neigh to Lightning, and hope the Brumby Hunter did not hear it.

He and Thowra kept trotting along, listening and looking, looking into the bush on either side. They only heard the dingo howl that simply had to be Miss Dingo saying 'Here we are', but they could not see anything.

Lightning, however, must have seen them — the ghostly Silver Brumby and, perhaps, Socks's four white legs in the darkness. Lightning's low growl alerted Socks, and he trotted towards the dog and Miss Dingo, rubbing his head on the dear old dog's coat.

They all stood together, Miss Dingo, Lightning, Thowra and Socks — Socks so delighted to be with Lightning again, and Lightning rubbing against him.

Then Lightning seemed to hear a distant sound. Socks and Thowra put their heads up to listen too. Far away they could all hear a heavy horse breaking through the bushes. It seemed to go more quietly for a few moments. There was just the whispering sound of many animals creeping.

They all listened for a while, and then Thowra led off again, moving more quickly now, because he knew that the Brumby Hunter was on their trail, and that now there would be Lightning and Miss Dingo to add to their tracks.

They went through patches of thick scrub, knowing that the snow shaken off the leaves would cover their tracks.

Socks and Lightning were so pleased to be together that they almost danced along — and Miss Dingo, knowing that Lightning was happy, danced along, too, and occasionally rubbed against Lightning.

The wind was coming now, in stronger gusts, and the taller trees were creaking. Strong limbs rubbed against each other, and a giant flying phalanger barked its repetitive bark. Everything was normal in the bush — for a night of rising wind — except for the whispered sound of animals creeping.

When they stopped to listen once, Socks saw that Lightning's hair was standing up along his backbone, and he thought, 'They're getting closer!' Thowra thought the same but also thought, 'I've done it before, I can do it again, even if it is snowing hard. At least my tracks will be covered. He won't see my exact take-off place!' He trotted on a little faster, then faster.

Socks had an idea what was going to happen, but he was anxious. The snow was falling too thickly. He could hear the Brumby Hunter getting close. It was time to tug at Lightning's ear and get further into thick scrub then head to safety, while the Brumby Hunter peered uselessly through the snow storm, listening for sounds he would never hear.

He urged Lightning and Miss Dingo into a thick wall of scrub, where he knew they could stay, and got a spot from which he could see out himself. By the sound of cantering hooves there would not be long to wait.

He saw Thowra hiding in another band of scrub, some distance from the cliff above. Then he saw him, all crusted with blowing snow, standing in a clearing, then rising up in a half-rear and suddenly throwing up his head and neighing, 'Come and get me. Come and get me!'

The Brumby Hunter appeared, with his dog just at his horse's heels. Lightning gave a faint growl and was ready to bound out at the dog, but Socks took hold of his ear.

Then Thowra took off at a gallop straight for the two candlebarks through which Socks knew he was going to jump. The Brumby Hunter leapt forward with a shout, but all he would have seen was the ghost of a horse leaping through the falling snow, as his horse slid to a stop on the snow-covered edge of the cliff.

## Twelve

Two days later, Socks stood between Thowra and Son of Storm, staring up at the cliff top where the Brumby Hunter was walking about looking at tracks, or trying to find tracks that had vanished under the snow.

Benni the kangaroo had arrived at the Ingegoodbee, saying that Thowra might need help, and Socks and Lightning had gone back to the Secret Valley.

Socks touched Lightning with his nose. Lightning's sixth sense should tell him what the Brumby Hunter was doing. Suddenly he felt Lightning's hackles rising. Something must be happening up there!

Lightning stepped a few steps forward. He growled a deep growl.

Socks strained his eyes into the distance, through the faint predawn light. He realised that the dark bulk which he could see, hovering on the edge of the cliff, was the Brumby Hunter's dog.

Lightning gave another throaty growl.

Then it seemed as if the dog on the cliff top took two tentative steps forward, hung there for a moment, then a half-step.

Even in the grey dawn, Socks could tell that the dog was trembling.

Socks knew that cliff top well. There was barely a foot hold for a cat, far less a heavy dog — but he watched.

Lightning watched, too, faintly growling way down in his throat.

Just then a great cloud of white rose-petal snow drops began to fall from the grey dawn, whispering snowflakes.

The dog on the cliff tried to bark. Socks and Lightning both saw that his feet were slipping. They could imagine the dog's breath taken in sharply, and Lightning barked in sympathy, as though it were his feet slipping on the horrifyingly, steep cliff. Then there was the Brumby Hunter's voice, calling his dog — but it was too late ...

The dog had slipped and hurtled through the air. He gave one cry, and Lightning leapt forward as he landed on the first of Thowra's landing places. He was apparently unhurt, though shaken. He had not folded his legs underneath like Thowra did when he jumped.

Lightning raced forward, heard the cry that the dog gave, but could see no way of reaching him, no way of him getting further down — or back up.

Suddenly feeling that the dog *must* be saved — even if he had killed Miss

Dingo's beloved pup — Lightning turned to Thowra to save him, but he found that Thowra was standing close behind him already.

They heard the Brumby Hunter calling his dog, and a faint whimper from the dog.

Lightning whimpered, too, suddenly feeling desperately anxious that the dog should be saved — even though he had a score to settle with him. Little did Lightning know that the instinct that was driving him was a family bond — the Brumby Hunter's dog was in fact his half-brother.

Lightning looked anxiously at Thowra — his eyes pleading. Then he pressed against Thowra's leg, asking him to help.

Thowra looked down at the old dog as he moved closer to the cliff, bent his head to him for one touch of friendship, and then looked up at the cliff again. By going round through Son of Storm's Secret Valley and jumping over the cliff, he could land beside the dog on the little ledge. But that would give his escape route away to the Brumby Hunter. Better to keep his secret if possible, and find some other way.

He stood for a while, staring at the cliff — at the various little landing places for leaping down after the first wild jump through air.

Lightning looked from Thowra back to the cliff again. To him it looked impossible, but then so had the waterfall that Thowra had jumped into with Miss Dingo!

Then he saw Thowra begin to move forward, his eyes fixed on the cliff.

Lightning watched. Even if, by some miracle, Thowra got up to the dog, how could he get him down?

But Thowra was magic.

Thowra, too, was wondering how he could get a heavy dog down the cliff — even if he risked going round to the top and jumping, how would he get him down?

In the end, that was what he did. Thowra went round the track to Son of Storm's Valley and went silently along the top of the cliff, hoping not to meet the Brumby Hunter.

Lightning saw him, like a shadow between the two candlebarks, all masked by falling snow — and knew what he intended to do.

Still the question remained — how would he get the dog down — and somehow that big dog had to be helped down!

Lightning and Socks watched, both realising that it was a perilously anxious moment — Socks anxious for Thowra, Lightning knowing that he desperately wanted Thowra to save the dog.

Thowra knew that his escape route to the Secret Valley would probably be no

secret any longer — not if the Brumby Hunter saw him.

There was no sign of the Brumby Hunter. Between the candlebark trees for one moment it seemed as though the horse was backing into the scrub, perhaps to enable him to get a run-up for a jump.

Just then the snowflakes thickened. Lightning's eyes involuntarily closed against them, so the next thing he saw, through the falling snow, was the Silver Stallion airborne, floating and dropping through the flake-filled air. And it seemed to him that Thowra was flying with great white wings, his legs folded underneath him.

Lightning closed his eyes, almost praying for that beautiful silver horse and the dog who was stuck on the cliff, but he had to open his eyes again to see what was happening.

He saw Thowra unfold his legs and land on the ledge beside the dog ... but what could he do? Then Thowra was climbing, like a cat, around a faint track to one side of the ledge.

He heard him give a little whinny to the dog, saw the dog get up, limping, and follow him along the faint track, limping as though he had hurt a leg, or even his back, when he fell.

Thowra had stopped on a small, flat rock, and was looking carefully around. Occasionally he looked upwards, as did Lightning, but they could see neither hide nor hair of the Brumby Hunter.

Still watching Thowra, Lightning wondered, 'What now?' — then he saw Thowra gather himself together and jump.

For a moment from below Thowra looked like a great white bird, legs pulled up underneath him. For a moment it seemed to Lightning that he hung or floated in the air directly above him — a huge silver horse with white wings folded along his back and then spread to steady himself. But were they really wings, or was the white hawk there?

At the moment the Silver Brumby had jumped the dog had given a cry — Lightning had nearly echoed it because he felt — just for a moment — that the poor dog had been deserted on the cliff side. However, Lightning knew immediately that Thowra would not desert the dog, and he gasped as the dog jumped and flew through the air — yelping with fear and pain.

Lightning felt his muscles become ready and taut as he saw Thowra extending his legs and landing on the soft valley floor, and he gave another sigh as he realised that the dog was going to land in nearly the same place.

Lightning began to run to the spot where both Thowra and the dog had dropped into the valley. He got there just as the dog gave a sharp cry of pain as it landed. Lightning ran over to it, putting his head down to where it lay



whimpering slightly. Then he began to lick away the tears that trickled from its eyes. 'Poor dog, poor dog,' Lightning thought, then Socks and Thowra came close by too.

Lightning looked at the dog's face. Somewhere he had seen that dog's face before — reflected in the calm, sunset-coloured water — the Ingegoodbee Pools ... not far from home ... dear Miss Dingo should have been beside him in that reflection. It was his own face Lightning saw ... the poor dog. All animosity forgotten, even if this dog had killed his pup.

Then Lightning lay down beside his old enemy and licked his sore leg, feeling a sudden tenderness go through him. After a while Thowra nudged both dogs to get up, and he led them to the cave that Socks and Lightning now seemed almost to own.

He turned back and gave the dog a little tug on the ear to lead him, limping, to the nice dry cave. As soon as the dog saw the cave, he lay down on the sand.

Lightning lay down beside him and continued licking round his eyes. The dog stopped whimpering and licked lightly in return.

Snow was still falling as whirling circles but the cave was sheltered and dry, and Miss Dingo, having followed them, was there and had killed two rabbits and laid them on the sandy floor for the dogs.

Outside, a weak dawn light fell through the snow shower, and Lightning could hear the comforting call of the bronze cuckoo.

The Silver Brumby was obviously restless; so was Socks. Socks knew that Thowra might be thinking that his secret place might be secret no longer, because the Brumby Hunter would know that he had led the dog down into it.

Socks heard the bronze cuckoo, too, and got a little closer to Lightning. Somehow he was sure that the Brumby Hunter would not leave them alone.

The only answer was to get the dog back to his master. The dog seemed to be perfectly happy with Lightning, but he would be better off with his master, *and* less danger to the Secret Valley.

Thowra knew he would have to find another way out of his Secret Valley — and a way that the lame dog could manage.

That night, when the snowflakes began to fall through the moonbeams, the Silver Brumby went like a ghost along the valley floor, below the track that led to Son of Storm's Valley, and he found a way where he thought he could lead the dog back to his master without leaving any tracks. Thowra left the Brumby Hunter's dog just away from the edge of the cliff, where he knew the Brumby Hunter was bound to find him. He waited in the trees until the Hunter arrived to collect the wounded animal.

Thus it was that the Brumby Hunter found his dog was back with him, and

he did not know if a ghost horse had brought him there.

He never knew whether or not he had dreamt that his dog was brought to him in the snowy night, by the ghost of the Silver Brumby.

Lightning found that the dog had gone, saw Thowra's hoofmarks leading down the valley floor, and knew that the dog was all right.

## Thirteen

Socks, Lightning, and Miss Dingo decided to head for home before the Hunter gathered himself together again from his slide right to the very brink of the cliff, which had indeed been a brush with death.

There would be another legend to add to the legends already told about the Silver Brumby, and still no one, not even the Brumby Hunter, would know if he were a ghost or a living horse.

The Brumby Hunter might yet claim that he had chased a ghost, and that it had nearly led him over a cliff — or would he feel stupid?

It would not do to appear to be stupid — after all, he was known to be the greatest of all brumby hunters in the mountains.

Though Miss Dingo was in a hurry to get home, they did not go very fast. Lightning was pleased to get into the deepest of the Ingegoodbee Pools. Socks drank long and deeply. Miss Dingo just lay at the edge of the pool in which Lightning swam.

After a while she got up, barked at Lightning, and headed for home. Socks gave her a friendly rub of the ears, and Lightning leapt out of the pool and pounced on a young rabbit which was hidden in a nearby tussock. He brought the kitten rabbit to Miss Dingo, who seemed very hungry because she sat down and ate it.

Then they all hurried on to the hollow tree. Lightning caught another rabbit on the way and carried it for Miss Dingo, giving it to her when she curled up in what had been the dog pup's nest. She whimpered as she got the whiff of the pup's scent again, but Socks noticed that she accepted the rabbit gratefully and was happier when Lightning lay down close to her.

Socks found himself thinking she would get snappy soon, and suddenly realised that he knew she was going to have a pup or pups.

Lightning knew what was about to happen when she cleared everyone out of the hollow tree. The time had come for Miss Dingo to give birth.

A day or so passed — in which she ate ravenously and drank the Ingegoodbee nearly dry; and dear old, patient Lightning waited to be invited in to see the pups. He almost tiptoed in.

There in the dead male pup's nest was just one pup — and both Lightning and Miss Dingo were overjoyed because it was a male pup, to be loved and

cherished like the one that was killed by the Brumby Hunter's dog.

Socks found himself invited back into the hollow tree, too, and was delighted to find Miss Dingo friendly and loving again, and it seemed as if they would all live happily together in the hollow tree above the Ingegoodbee River.

Night closed in, and presently the bright stars of a clear winter's night shone above. Far south of the Ingegoodbee, the Southern Cross shone brilliantly. No snow was falling.

Lightning did not curl up and sleep all at once. He could sense that lots of little animals were on the move through the bush, as if something were driving them from the north. After a while, he got a faint whiff on the breeze, he found his hackles rising before he even knew what the scent was — or that it was dangerous.

The image of that dead pup rose in his mind before he realised that the scent was of the dog that had killed the pup, and also of the Brumby Hunter's horse.

An echidna scuttled past the hollow tree, and then three wallabies; up in a candlebark, a giant flying phalanger barked. Lightning was too disturbed by the general movement of small animals to even catch a young hare for Miss Dingo. He was also wondering what to do, where to go — if anywhere?

It was too late to go anywhere.

There was the Brumby Hunter's dog at the hollow tree's opening, and there he was with his hackles up, leaping at the dog in a wild fury. They rolled each other over in the mud outside the hollow tree, growling and biting and struggling.

Then suddenly the Brumby Hunter had his whip in his hand and was cracking it over both dogs.

Socks saw Lightning get one crack from the whip, and it was time for him to intervene. He caught a vision of the brilliant stars in the dark sky, and he sprang out of the hollow tree and charged at the Brumby Hunter, knocking him off balance, as he raised his whip again. The horse stumbled on a tree root, the man cursed. Socks charged again and again and got a stallion's bite in on the Brumby Hunter's horse's neck. For a moment there was chaos when Miss Dingo sprang at the strange dog too. Then the man collected himself and called his dog off, and peace reigned.

Socks lay down across the entrance to the hollow tree to guard his 'family', but he felt fairly sure that there would be no more fighting visitors.

Just once, in that shining night, he woke and saw, against the stars, the silver shape of Thowra. The Silver Brumby simply stood there looking into the hollow, and then he bowed his head down to Socks's nose and blew him a soft farewell and vanished, back to his Secret Valley. No snow fell that night, and Socks and

Lightning remembered forever seeing the noble head of the Silver Brumby against the stars, and remembered having jumped with him down the waterfall, and climbed with him up the ice-coated rocks, ice chips flying from their hooves and feet off the rocks — up into the country that was the Silver Brumby's forever and forever.

## Afterword

Let me tell you about my favourite books of all time —Elyne Mitchell's *Brumby* books — and how I came to be a devoted fan of these tales.

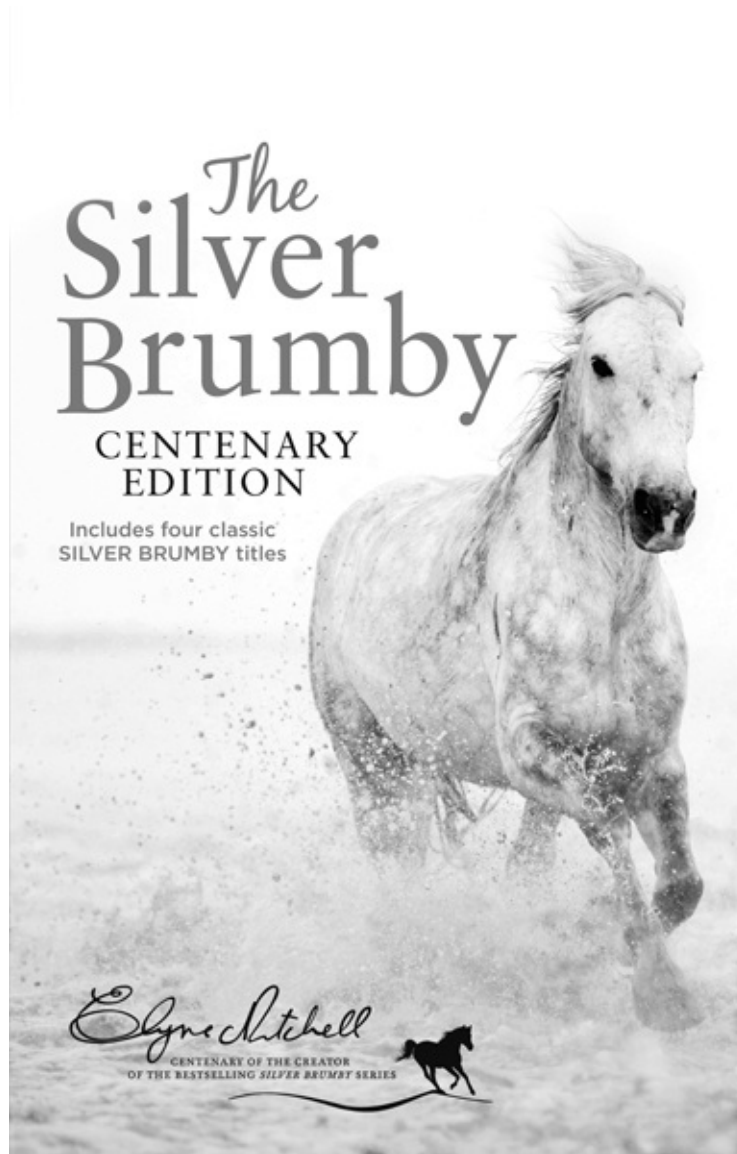
In the early 1970s I was given the first four *Silver Brumby* books for Christmas by my mother, who knew I liked horses. In these stories the horses talk to each other and to other bush creatures, a unique feature of the series. Initially this concept of dialogue between the horses put me off the books as I didn't really appreciate fantasy, so I only read a few pages of *The Silver Brumby* before setting all four of the books aside. This was a time in my life when I thought electronic dictionaries were good reading!

It wasn't until I found myself in bed with the flu and nothing to do that I looked at the books again, and found, to my surprise, that they were fantastic. I have read the stories of the *Silver Brumby* series many times, often starting again as soon as I have finished reading them. I have even created lists and family trees for most of the horses that appear in these stories just for the fun of it, which you can find on my website: [www.blaze.net.au/~sasami/brumby/](http://www.blaze.net.au/~sasami/brumby/)

In each story Elyne Mitchell describes in detail the beauty of the Australian high country in a way that only someone who has lived there could. Even though these books were written for children, if you love horses I recommend you read these stories, no matter what your age.

I can only say thank you to Elyne Mitchell for sharing with us these beautiful creatures of her imagination, and the bush through which they run.

*Ken Stone, 2002*



To many people the name Elyne Mitchell is synonymous with *The Silver Brumby*, the timeless classic that has captivated the hearts and imaginations of young readers since it was first published in 1958.

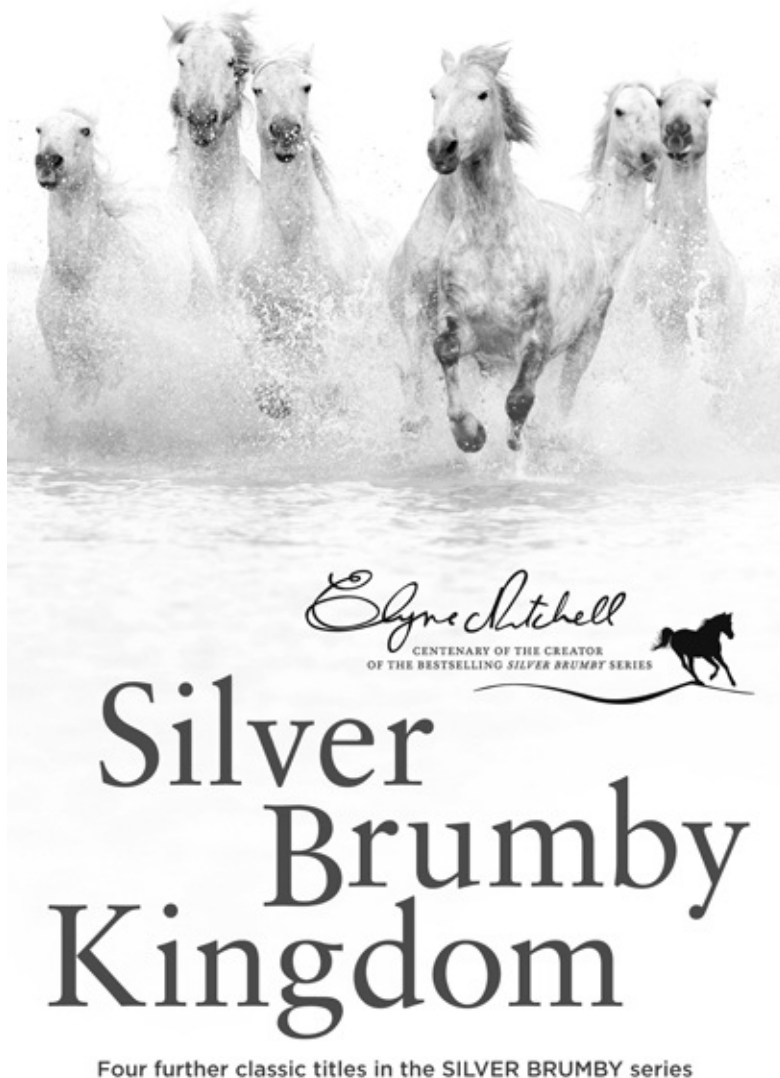
This special edition commemorates the centenary of Elyne Mitchell's birth and contains *The Silver Brumby* and three other favourites: *Silver Brumby's Daughter*, *Silver Brumbies of the South* and *Silver Brumby Kingdom*. These

much-loved classics tell the story of Thowra, the magnificent silver stallion, king of the brumbies. Whether you are enjoying the *Silver Brumby* series for the first time or rediscovering it after many years, this is a book to be treasured.

Also included in this beautiful edition is a specially commissioned biographical note of Elyne Mitchell, who was born in 1913 and went on to become one of Australia's most successful and popular authors. The biographical note also contains photographs that depict Elyne in many other areas of her long and distinguished life, including that of daughter, wife, mother, athlete, horsewoman, farmer and environmentalist.

[Buy Now](#)





The first *Silver Brumby* book was published in 1958 to great acclaim, and the continuing success of the *Silver Brumby* series has ensured Elyne Mitchell as one of Australia's best-loved children's authors.

This edition contains  
*Moon Filly*  
*Silver Brumby Whirlwind*

*Son of the Whirlwind and  
Silver Brumby, Silver Dingo.*

It is the second volume to enjoy after *The Silver Brumby Centenary Edition* and continues the story of Thowra, the silver stallion, king of the brumbies, and how his mysterious legend weaves itself in his extended herd of brumbies.

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## Books by Elyne Mitchell

### SILVER BRUMBY SERIES

*The Silver Brumby* (1958)  
*Silver Brumby's Daughter* (1960)  
*Silver Brumbies of the South* (1965)  
*Silver Brumby Kingdom* (1966)  
*Moon Filly* (1968)  
*Silver Brumby Whirlwind* (1973)  
*Son of the Whirlwind* (1979)  
*Silver Brumby, Silver Dingo* (1993)  
*Dancing Brumby* (1995)  
*Brumbies of the Night* (1996)  
*Dancing Brumby's Rainbow* (1998)  
*The Thousandth Brumby* (1999)  
*Wild Echoes Ringing* (2003)

### OTHER CHILDREN'S FICTION

*Kingfisher Feather* (1962)  
*Winged Skis* (1964)  
*Jinki Dingo of the Snows* (1970)  
*Light Horse to Damascus* (1971)  
*The Colt at Taparoo* (1975)  
*The Colt from Snowy River* (1979)  
*Snowy River Brumby* (1980)  
*Brumby Racer* (1981)  
*The Man from Snowy River* (1982)

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